Yours, Mother

Sanjib Chattopadhyay

॥১॥ (Part I)

Just a while ago, Mother scolded Father severely. I didn't tell her not to, because my Bengali teacher told me, "Always use good Bengali words. If you want to learn Bengali, be a Bengali. Sit on the floor on a mat and eat rice from a bell-metal plate, drink water from a bell-metal glass. Bathe and wipe yourself with a *gamcha*. Rub mustard oil all over your body. You are small now, wearing half-pants is fine. When you grow up, wear a dhoti and panjabi." I was lying quietly inside the mosquito net.

My alarm clock was set for exactly 5:00 AM. My grandfather had gifted it to me on my birthday and said, "Buro, it's my time to go, so I am leaving you with three pieces of advice. Leave your bed before the sun rises every day. Whether it rains or storms, exercise daily, and bathe in clean, cold water. And never neglect your work for idle gossip." Just seven days after saying this, my grandfather passed away laughing in the evening. He was sitting on the bed, telling me a story about Haridwar. The story never finished. I remember exactly how far he got. Someday, I will have to go where my grandfather has gone. I will go and see my grandfather sitting under a tree in a massive garden. I will go and plop down right next to him. In heaven, people have no work to do. Just songs and stories. No exams to take, no jobs to do. No one fights with anyone. No one yells like a bull saying, "Vote for us, vote for us." No one throws bombs. India doesn't lose miserably to Pakistan in cricket and break our hearts. Why would they lose? They don't even play cricket in heaven. God only occasionally plays chess there. Sweet fruits hang from the trees; whenever you are hungry, you just pluck and eat them. Rivers of sherbet. Mountains of *sandesh*. Blue birds whistling on branches. After exchanging a few pleasantries, I'll tell my grandfather, "Tell me the story. That evening you came down from Chandi Hill and saw a monk sitting in meditation. There were pebbles everywhere. The Ganges water was rushing by. In the light of the setting sun, the mountain looked like a mountain of gold..."

I do exactly everything my grandfather told me to do. When my alarm rings, both my parents wake up. They have no choice! What an alarm it is! It rings seven times with pauses in between. And I have a furry white dog. A very good boy. His name is Pinka. He absolutely hates that alarm clock. He charges at it and barks furiously. Does anyone have the power to sleep through that? Yet, I remained in bed.

Father washed his face and said to Mother, "But I don't have any money left for the market." Mother replied, "What do you mean! I am done with you. There are seven days left in the month, and I somehow gave you two hundred rupees and told you to manage carefully. What did you do with that money?" Father said, "Believe me, I didn't spend a single paisa on myself. I had to give it to someone." "Had to give it to someone? Meaning? To whom? Why?" "I gave it to our office peon, Madhu. The poor guy is in deep trouble. You can't even imagine

the kinds of trouble people fall into! Suddenly. Completely out of the blue. It was as if the sky fell on his head. His three-year-old daughter was playing. While playing, she fell into a basin of hot water mixed with soda and soap. Alas, such a little girl! What will happen now? Will she even survive!" Father's face looked like he was about to cry.

My mother, however, was unfazed. She stared at Father with wide eyes. From inside the mosquito net, I said, "Father, don't worry, she will get better. She will be perfectly fit in a month." Mother then rattled off a barrage of words at Father: "Yes, your heart just overflows with sympathy for others. Every month, two hundred to this one, a hundred to that one. Do you own an estate? Here I am, stretching every penny, struggling to run this household. You don't feel the need to look at me. My sari is torn. Your shoes are torn. The boy doesn't have a decent shirt or pants to wear anywhere." I immediately said, "I don't need shirts or pants. I have plenty." I was on Father's side.

Mother was all about calculations. She has a diary where she just writes: potatoes, one kilo; bitter gourd, two hundred grams; tomatoes, one kilo. Who writes all that in a diary? What's the point? We will eat it. It will run out. If we have money, we will buy more. If not, we'll pour water on rice, mix it with salt, and eat it. It tastes wonderful. I often eat exactly that. Father told me, "Look Buro, we are not rich. We have to live with a little hardship. I don't always get my money on time. I can't manage all that, you understand? I won't be able to feed you fish, meat, kalia, and pulao every day. Deal? Surrender?" I replied, "I don't want to eat all that anyway." Father was overjoyed. He said, "Shake hands!"

My grandfather was a teacher. The Headmaster of Harendranath Vidyaniketan. I've heard from Father that they struggled a lot to run the household. Grandfather used to say, "You can't become a true human being without enduring hardship." I just want to become a true human being. A very great one. Even greater than my grandfather. Grandfather told me before he left, "I will bless you from above. I will tell God, 'I only have one grandson. Make him a true human being, God.'"

Mother was walking around with a cup of tea. She couldn't find Father. After getting scolded, Father had hidden somewhere. Mother asked me, "Where is your father? Where did that man go!" My mother is very funny. When she gets angry, her face turns red. She says whatever comes to her mind. Exactly five to ten minutes later, everything cools down. Then she is the gentlest person on earth. Grandfather used to say, "Buro, your mother is dominated by anger; but of a high classical order. It has melody, rhythm, and beat!" Mother got along very well with Grandfather. Grandfather used to tutor her. She looked so beautiful then. She was a student. There used to be a little scolding too. Father would stand outside the window and dance with joy. "Serves her right. Serves her right." One day, Father called her "thick-headed." Grandfather replied, "You can feel hurt if you want to, but I'll say this: my daughter-in-law's brain is a thousand times better than yours. If I had the time, I would have made her do a Ph.D." Whenever Mother talks about Grandfather, she often bursts into tears. She says, "My own father died when I was a child. I finally found a father like a real father, and God took him away."

I know exactly where Father goes when he is upset. We have a small garden at the back of our house. My grandfather used to take great care of it. Now Mother does, Father does, and I do it a lot. Two trees planted by Grandfather, a Krishnachura and a Radhachura, have

grown quite big. Grandfather used to say, 'The Krishnachura is in memory of my father, Jogindranath. And the Radhachura is in memory of my mother.' I had a sister once. She didn't live long. Grandfather had planted a Kamini tree in her name. That too has become quite round and bushy. My mother planted a Cape Jasmine (Gandharaj) in Grandfather's name. It has grown beautifully. Both the leaves and flowers of the Gandharaj are beautiful.

Father was squatting under that tree, loosening the soil. He was absentmindedly pulling out blades of grass one by one. Krishnachura leaves fluttered down onto his head. The bougainvillea on the wall was blooming red. The red glow fell on Father's white vest. I stood right behind him and asked, "What are you doing, Father? Won't you have tea? Won't you go to the market?" Father said in a melancholic tone, "It doesn't matter if I go or don't go." I squatted next to him and asked, "Are you angry?" "I am very sad." "Why did you just hand over two hundred rupees like that? That's why Mother scolded you. You should do things thoughtfully." "What would you have done if you were me?" "I would have done exactly what you did." "Shake hands. Your mother is a third-class." "You shouldn't call Mother third-class. Could you have called my grandmother third-class?" "Of course I couldn't. You haven't seen my mother. Her heart was like a Gandharaj flower. Suppose, my mother was just sitting down to eat after feeding us all, and a guest arrived at the house. She would serve everything to them. Now, what would Mother do so that no one would realize she was fasting? She would chew a betel leaf, make her lips red, and walk around. No one could even tell she was fasting. This happened often. Was my mother just any ordinary mother? Go away." "My mother is also a formidable mother. How much do you know about my mother? She teaches three girls for free. Just the other day, she gave Ramala-di's daughter sixty rupees to buy a dress. Did you know that?" "Really! On God!" "On God."

Our conversation stopped. Mother was approaching with a cup of tea. "What, aren't you going to have tea?" I said, "Why won't he? Does the morning even begin without tea?" Mother said, "You don't need to act overly smart. Here, take it. I threw away the first cup and made a fresh one for you." Father reached out and took the cup. The smile hadn't yet returned to his face. Mother sat on the grass a little distance away. Plucking a blade of grass with two fingers and biting it with her teeth, she asked, "Will two hundred rupees be enough?" "Enough for what?" "For the treatment of your peon's daughter!" "Can you get medical treatment for two hundred rupees in this market? How much salary does a government office peon even get, tell me. On top of that, he has two or three kids." "Then you should rather give him another hundred rupees today." "Where will I get more money?" "From where you always do. I had somehow saved some money to buy something, I'll give it to you from that. Tell me, will the girl survive?" "We have to pray to God. Pray to God with all your heart." Mother got up and went to the kitchen. Father said, "Did you see? Will you find another mother like her? If you can find another one, I'll cut my ears off." I felt very happy then. A smile had blossomed on Father's face. Does it look good to stay serious and sad? I could already hear the market list being prepared from here. Father loves to do the grocery shopping, and Mother loves making the list. Bring this, bring that. Mother was saying, "I've lost my taste for cauliflower. Don't bring cauliflower anymore. Has pointed gourd (potol) arrived in the market?" "Of course it has, but if you hear the price, you'll lose your mind. They say it's twenty rupees a kilo. No matter which government sits in power, no one can properly control the market prices. It's an unbridled horse. And my luck is just as bad, I can't seem to increase my income no matter what." I said, "Why don't you buy a lottery ticket, Father!" "Nonsense, before this I bought lottery tickets continuously for a year—West Bengal,

Haryana, Arunachal—nothing happened." "Do you know Dhanesh-kaku won ten rupees last week?" "Is ten rupees a real win?" "It isn't, but at least he got something! Maybe one day he'll win ten lakh rupees." "If I get ten lakh rupees, I'll build a fountain." Mother asked, "What is that now?" "A fountain. Haven't you seen a fountain? I'll call the biggest engineer in Kolkata, have them dig a circle right in the middle of our garden, line it with blue stones, and build a beautiful fountain. The water will shoot up with a *fush-fush* sound right up to the second floor, with such force. We'll shine blue light from one side, red from another, and yellow from another side at night. It will be an absolute dream. In the afternoon, flocks of birds will come to bathe. I'll place three round chairs. The three of us will sit and eat salted peanuts. And chat. It would be nice if there was a mountain." "What do you mean by a mountain?" "Do you know what West Bengal's greatest misfortune is?" "Partition, the division of the country?" "Nonsense, that's already done. What's gone is gone. West Bengal's sky is too empty. Imagine a range of blue mountains resting against the sky. Sometimes clouds would come and wrap around the mountain peaks. So many things happen in so many places, mountains become oceans, oceans become mountains, but nothing seems to happen here. Do you know what happened one day? I dreamt that if you climb up to our attic roof, you can clearly see a mountain in the northern sky. The morning dream felt so real. I thought, true, I've never been to the attic roof; if I go up, surely I'll see a mountain. That dawn, I somehow scrambled up to the attic roof. The blue morning sky. A cold breeze blowing. Sleep was still in my eyes. With so much hope, I looked towards the northern sky, looked in so many ways. Where was it? Nothing. But I still believe, if there was a massively tall building like the Monument in this neighborhood, you could surely see mountains." Mother said, "How did you get this idea? You've studied the geography of West Bengal. Is there anything in the north other than the Himalayas? In the south, the ocean. In between, the plains. There are a couple of small hills in Bankura and Purulia. Where are you getting mountains from here?" "That's true, of course. But you never know what might happen when!"

Father left for the market with his bags. Mother said, "Buro, please sit down to study now." Of course, I will sit down to study. I have to become great. How great my grandfather was! Everyone still mentions his name. There is a small room under the stairs. A tiny closet-like room. This is where my grandfather used to sit in meditation. This room is now my study. There is a rattling table fan. That's enough for me. Grandfather used to say, 'Buro, don't make your body too comfortable, keep it in a bit of hardship. Don't listen to your mind. Listen to practical sense. Then you won't fall into danger. For example, it's very hot and you desperately want to eat cold ice cream. What does practical sense say? Eating ice cream in the heat causes a sore throat. You get a cold and cough. Suppose the mind says, let's go play. Playing is better than studying. What does practical sense say? If you don't study and become educated, life in your later years will be dark. And remember another thing, a person's life never stays the same forever. The one who is rich today might become poor tomorrow.' I will never forget these words of my grandfather.

There is a small window facing the garden in this little room of mine. As soon as I opened the window, I saw Father sneaking along the garden path. He didn't have the grocery bags in his hands. He was clutching something wrapped in a towel to his chest with both hands. I accidentally spoke a bit too loudly, "What's up, Father, where's your groceries?" Father said, "Shh." Looking at his face, it seemed like a very complicated situation. Father had cooked up something again. I whispered, "What have you done?" Father came right up to the window,

moved the towel, and showed me. A tiny little kitten. Pure white. He had invited disaster! "Father, Mother is going to scold you terribly this time. Don't bring cats into the house." "What are you saying! Do you know how much trouble I went through to get this? Its mother is of the Kabuli cat breed. Have you seen its mother? At Manju-babu's house. A thick tail like this. White as snow. I pleaded so much with Matu-babu's daughter Mallika. She gave it to me today. Oh, what luck!" "Luckily you have a lot of sorrow in store, Father. Mother is allergic just looking at cats." "Nonsense, those are your scrawny street cats. Thin tails. Emaciated bodies. These are pedigree cats."

I jumped. Mother was right behind me. In a rather sharp voice, she said, "What is this, you still haven't gone to the market? What is that in your hand?" Father smiled broadly and said, "Look, I brought such a beautiful thing for you." "What is it? A cat? Throw it away. Go drop it back immediately." "Hey, this is a Kaley breed kitten." "I don't understand Kaley or whatever. That cat will not enter this house. Are you planning to send me to a mental asylum in Ranchi?" Father's smiling face turned pathetic. The kitten was clinging to his chest, blinking its eyes. It had just opened its eyes. I tried to reason with Mother on Father's behalf, "It's good to have a cat in the house, Mother. You see how much trouble the mice cause!" "Yes, between father and son, you two turn this house into a zoo. Who will protect it from the dog! Pinka will finish it off in three minutes." "Mother, you don't have to worry about that. I will handle it." "Do whatever you think is best. I don't want to say anything. If I speak, everyone will just get angry." Mother walked away. From a distance, she said, "So the market is closed for today. Good riddance. I'll just pour water on the stove." Father said, "Shake hands, Buro. Your mother got out on zero runs and returned to the pavilion. What is this called, Buro?" "Lame duck." "A beautiful face wins everywhere. Seeing this golden little face, Buro, the lady was floored. Here, hold it. Now let me focus a bit on the household chores. You haven't run a household, if you had, you'd understand the pressure!"

I first placed the soft, fluffy kitten on my study table. It already had such long fur at this age. Just looking at the quality of its tail, I could tell it would be like a yak-tail whisk when it grew up. Its eyes were so beautiful! Like a pair of lapis lazuli gems. It didn't want to stay on the table. It hadn't quite learned to stand properly yet. All four legs were weak. Trembling, it would move a bit this way, a bit that way, and meow in a very fine voice. This was a big problem! If it kept doing this, Mother would get angry again. "Sit still for two seconds, brother."

Pinka has incredibly sharp ears. It just meowed slightly, and he came running, panting *hya-hya*. He came and stood on his hind legs, placing his two front paws on the table. Resting his chin on the edge of the table, he took a good look at the thing. Then he sniffed a bit, and occasionally growled. Finally, an eardrum-shattering bark: *Gheu!* So what if the cat was tiny! It had quite a temper. Arching its back like a bow, making its fur stand on end, puffing up its tiny tail, it started making a *fya-fya* sound from its mouth. This one barks, that one hisses, and so it went on. I said, "Oh Pinka, don't do that baby, he is your brother, brother." Who listens to whom? The more his barking increased, the more its hissing increased. And Pinka's habit! If something isn't within reach of his paws, he will scratch frantically and tremble. The kitten took shelter in a tunnel between two stacks of books. Pinka pushed with his paws and sent all the books crashing to the floor. There was an oil lamp sitting on a small wooden stool. The impact of the books sent it flying into the corner of the room.

Hearing the tremendous noise, Mother came running. The uncivilized Pinka was barking at the top of his lungs. Mother's face turned red with anger. Mother is very fair. I heard from my aunt that this kind of complexion is called 'milk-and-alta'. Mother said, "What kind of destructive sacrifice is going on here! What is all this?" "I didn't do it, Mother, Pinka did." Oil all over the floor. The lamp was upside down on one side. My history book on top of the oil. My math notebook. Pinka is very cunning. He immediately put his paws on Mother's waist, stretched lazily, then dropped to her feet with a thud and started rubbing his face against them. Smart boy! Mother said, "I will leave today. I've already spoken to Mataji at Sarada Math. I've had enough of this family life! Peace is better than my so-called happiness. You father and son can dance like ghosts all day. I will stay on my own. It has become unbearable, absolutely unbearable." The kitten meowed from between the books. Pinka growled from Mother's feet. "Buro, I am telling you repeatedly, cats and dogs are eternal enemies. Why will you be the cause of this innocent creature's death?" "Mother, I am telling you one thing, Grandfather told me, 'Buro, keep this house exactly like an ashram. Don't be jealous of anyone.' But Mother, you are being jealous of the cat." "I am jealous of the cat? What harm has it done to me that I should be jealous?" "You are jealous thinking Pinka will get less affection. And because you are jealous, Pinka is also being jealous." "You've learned to talk a lot! But let me tell you, if anything happens after this, don't come crying 'mya mya' to me." "Let me tell you, first I will initiate Pinka into the mantra of non-violence, then you will see our Push riding around on his back." "Say one more thing: a giant rat is riding on Push's back. Since you're doing non-violence, do it properly." Mother left. Pinka lay down under my chair and let out a deep sigh.

Thank goodness, everything was quiet now. The kitten was sitting comfortably in the cave between the two rows of books. Let me sit down to study now. My grandfather told me, 'Before doing any work, make a resolution. That is the religion of a human being. You can write the resolution on paper, or you can keep it in your mind. Whenever you start a day, before starting, write down what you want to do all day, one, two, on a piece of paper and hang it in front of your eyes. Remember, a day means twenty-four hours. Out of these twenty-four hours, you spend eight hours sleeping. Two to three hours go into bathing and eating. So twelve hours out of twenty-four are gone just like that. You have twelve left. Six go to school. Commuting takes, say, one. That's seven. You have five left. Only five hours. Two hours go into chatting or reading storybooks. Only three hours. Three hours in a whole day.'

I wrote today's date on a piece of paper; then number one, brush up on history. Number two, English. Number three, the heavy hitter: Math. Number four, find the Bengali question-answer notebook in the pile of old newspapers. Number five, feed earthworms to the goldfish I kept in the glass jar. Stand there and watch it eat and play. Number six, pack my school bag. Number seven, shout from the roof and ask Shekhar, did you find the tennis ball? Number eight, before going to bathe, I have to put a ladle of rotted oil-cake fertilizer at the base of the trees. Disgusting smell. I have many, many tasks. Grandfather used to say, 'Buro, never stay without work. An idle brain is the devil's workshop.'

The cat slowly emerged from the book tunnel. It started meowing again with half-closed eyes. Pinka's sleep vanished. Coming out from under the chair, he stood up on his two hind legs next to the table. Panting again. Because he couldn't reach the cat with his paws, he made a whining crying sound. A huge problem! "Shiva, Shiva." This I learned from my

grandfather. Grandfather used to say, 'When the mind gets agitated, put your hand on your own head and say Shiva Shiva. You will see the mind has calmed down.' It was truly so. While stroking Pinka's furry head, I said three or four times, Shiva Shiva Shiva. Leaning against the chair's leg, Pinka dropped down with a thud and let out a deep sigh.

Mother, it seemed, had come to see if I was studying! From the doorway, she asked, "What are you doing?" "Trying to study, Mother." "When will that attempt be successful?" Mother came into the room. The anger seemed to have subsided. Standing behind me, she was looking at the flower-white cat. She asked, "Hey, has it opened its eyes?" "I think so, Mother. A little bit." "Alas, taking such a tiny baby away from its mother's lap! Who will feed it milk with cotton wool now. Come, come, chuk chuk." Mother's call. How could the cat not listen! It looked around. Mother picked the cat up and held it to her chest. Mother was wearing a light yellow sari today. The white cat against that yellow chest. I said, "Mother, you are my mother, and Push's mother too." "Yes, I have nothing better to do than be Push's mother and sit holding him to my chest all day." Seeing the cat in Mother's lap made Pinka lose his mind again. Jumping up, he started barking. Mother was saying, "Shame on you Pinka, don't be jealous, don't be jealous. Your brother. Push is your brother."

Just then, Father returned from the market. Holding a huge cardboard box. Written on it was TV. Father was surprised to see the cat in Mother's lap. And Mother was surprised to see the giant box in Father's hand. Father said laughing, "You know, I got the proof today." "Proof of what?" "He who eats sugar, God provides for him. I thought I would buy a wicker basket for Push. I didn't need to. God provided." "What will you use that for? Raising cockroaches?" "No dear, this is our Push's house. I have seen in foreign books that cats all live in boxes. They love to stay in boxes. So I got the thing. Now let me set it up and put him to sleep." "Well, is your age increasing or decreasing?" Father smiled broadly and said, "Age belongs to the mind! If the mind's age doesn't increase, what can I do!" "People will laugh." "People! Sri Ramakrishna said, 'People are like worms.' In this world, I will live my way, they will live theirs."

After this, Father got very busy with the cat's house. He told me, "Listen Buro, human houses have plans, what kind of plan does a cat's house have, eh!" I thought for a bit and said, "Listen, cats don't have separate houses, cats live in human houses." "That's true, of course. Birds have nests. That's very simple. A basket between two branches of a tree. Only the weaver bird's nest has some craftsmanship in it. Have you seen a snake's nest?" "I've seen a hole." "A hole isn't a nest, that's the door. The entrance. There are many arrangements inside. Inner sanctum. Bedroom, bathroom, nursery." "Have you seen it, Father?" "No. Will I ever have that luck! I think, otherwise how could a snake's huge body stay in there? In winter, they don't even come out of the nest. There must be such arrangements under the ground." "How do you know all this, Father?" "You see Buro, there are many things that cannot be known. One shouldn't even try to know exactly. You have to imagine it. Take, for example, a fairy. Has anyone ever seen a fairy? Yet look, so many stories have been written. Reading those stories, I genuinely feel that someday I will actually see a fairy. Bright moonlight everywhere, the dead of night. No one is awake anywhere. Far, far away, the *Tistisi* bird is calling." "What bird is the *Tistisi* bird, Father?" "I haven't seen that bird. I have heard its call late, late at night. That bird doesn't call during the dark lunar fortnight. It calls during the bright fortnight. It goes *tis-tis*. You don't know. Because you stay asleep, there is so much you don't find out. On bright moonlit nights, I go and stand quietly

near that Krishnachura tree. Tell me why?" "What time of night would that be, Father?" "Say, around two o'clock. Buro, do you know what I think? Guess what?" "What, Father?" "Sunlight is powder. Sandy. Very intense. And moonlight is liquid. Wet. Like fine mist of water. Like vapor. If you stay in the moonlight for a long time, you'll see your body feels somewhat wet. I think, if you keep moonlight frozen on ice, it turns into pearls!" "Pearls grow in the bellies of oysters, Father." "Nonsense, that's what scientists say. Apart from science, there are so many things in the world. Is everything just two plus two equals four? My father has a notebook, I will secretly show it to you one day." "My grandfather's notebook?" "Yes, you could call it a book. What a beautiful name, 'Apodartho Bigyan' (The Science of the Worthless / Non-material Science)." "Why do you go and stand near that Krishnachura tree?" "In case I see something!" "What would you see, Father?" "Suppose a tiny, bright little fairy flew in spreading her wings. Flitting about on her own above the trees. From this branch to that. It could happen. Who keeps track of the night! Take, for instance, a mermaid. Surely they exist. Whoever saw one, saw one. Just because I haven't seen one doesn't mean I can dismiss them saying they don't exist. Snowman, the Yeti. Surely exists. How many things exist in this world, who can say. You will read your grandfather's 'Apodartho Bigyan', when you read it you will know everything. You know, one day in the late hours of the night, what do I see, your grandfather is picking flowers in the garden. *Gulancha* flowers are scattered on the grass. He is picking them one by one and keeping them in the hem of his shawl. As soon as I called out, 'Father,' the place became like mist. A while later I see, everything is clear. No one is anywhere." "Really?" "On God." "Then I will tell you, one day I saw Grandmother in this room." "Is it possible you believe it?" "I do, Father." "Shake hands." "How does it happen?" "Then listen, listen very carefully. A person, say lives in this world for sixty or seventy years, then where do they go?" "They go to the sky." "Fine, let's assume they went to the sky. Does that mean they are completely gone! Is it that easy! Did all those years of living just become worthless? Like suppose I go to the roof right now, what does that mean? I am not in this room, but I am on the roof. Actually, you know what, if you hold them with your mind, no one can leave. Looking at your face, it seems you haven't understood properly. Wait, let me explain it a bit more. Oh, in a simple way. Imagine I am flying a kite in the sky. If the string is in my hand, I can pull the kite down, or let it fly far away. Can I or can I not?" "Yes, you can." "That's it, no more worries. You've understood. The mind is that string. How did I explain it, tell me?" "Truly, you explained it well. Brilliantly explained." "My father was a teacher. A renowned teacher. Not an insignificant scapegoat like your father." "Oh, as if I don't know. You were a very good student. You used to stand first or second in exams. You passed your M.A. with a First Class. Grandmother used to praise you so much to me. She used to say, 'There is no son like my son. You also have to become like your father.'" "Bah, what kind of son am I! I couldn't serve my father at all. Worthless. That man suffered for me his whole life. I couldn't do anything."

Saying "couldn't do anything, couldn't do anything" three or four times, Father burst into tears. I got up and told Mother, "Go see, how Father is crying." Mother ran over. Ever since Grandmother passed away, Father frequently bursts into tears like this. He becomes somewhat strange whenever talking about Grandmother.

Meanwhile, another incident. Mother had left Push on the floor and run to Father. I hadn't noticed either. Pinka came running. Instead of quickly scooping the cat up in my arms, I closed my eyes and started saying silently, 'Grandmother, save Push. Grandmother, save Push.' I thought I would hear a snapping sound and look up to see everything was over.

Instead, I heard Pinka gently scolding someone in an affectionate voice. And along with it, a scuffling sound. I looked fearfully. Oh brother, the two of them had become quite good friends. A game was in full swing. Push was lying flat on his back, and Pinka was nudging him with his nose, tickling him with his paw. They were really getting into it. When Pinka gets into a playful mood, his face becomes quite mischievous. It was that face now. As soon as I looked and smiled a little, he scolded me. Can one stay quiet seeing this scene? Although Mother told me, 'Buro, don't suddenly yell like a bull from time to time,' I still shouted, "Mother, come quickly and see." Pinka scolded me again. Pushing the cat like a ball with his paw, he took it to the wall. Mother came running. She thought some disaster had happened. Father came running too. Both were amazed. Pinka was sitting with the cat tucked near his lap. Sitting there panting happily. Father said, "Ah, what a delightful scene. Ah, what a heavenly scene! Like a sage's hermitage, like Krishna's Vrindavan!"

"Father, aren't you going to the office today? Have you seen what time it is?" Father looked at his watch and said, "Aren't you going to school?" "We have a holiday today." "Why a holiday? What is the holiday for today?" "Sports." "Since you have a holiday, let me take a CL (Casual Leave) too. Going to the office every day makes me feel somewhat like a slave. What kind of freedom have we achieved, tell me. I don't understand anything." "But this will be your third day of leave this month." Mother keeps track of everything. "Even so, I'll still have six days left." "Father, so it's a holiday then?" "Holiday, holiday. Hot, fresh *roti*. Going to that depressing place every single day! I don't like going to the office alone. It feels like five o'clock just refuses to strike. If all offices were abolished, it would be great."

"You know, I too will declare independence one day. The plan and program are ready. One day you will see, a massive truck has come and stopped in front of our house. You will be surprised and say, 'Oh my, what is this! I told you to go to the coal shop and order one mound of coal, and I see they have sent a whole truck!' I will smile mysteriously then. By then, they will have opened the back of the truck. Coal pouring down like a waterfall. A mountain of coal will be created on the street. Shoveling it, they'll move all the coal into the garden." Father kept talking, leaning against the wall, with a happy face and half-closed eyes. Mother said, "With so many things in the world, one truckload of coal?" "Ah, just listen. You shouldn't mess up during the planning stage. I will set up a coal and firewood shop on one side of the garden. A huge balance scale will hang there. Large weights looking like bells. Two or three medium-sized shovels. I will name the shop 'Temple of Liberation'. I'll have a bamboo platform built, spread a sack on it, and sit there. Wearing pajamas and a vest. In front of me, a polished wooden cash box. Shop opening times: morning seven to one in the afternoon, and over there, afternoon four to six. *Kestokoli* trees all around, in the middle the mountain of coal, and firewood on one side. A big hammer. I will break coal all day. Break it and sell it. Tell me why? I heard a story in my childhood. A certain lady, while breaking coal, found a diamond as big as a large betel nut. Who knows how many diamonds are going into the stove like this. Oh yes, I forgot to mention, I will buy a van, a cycle-van, to supply coal house to house. At most, I'll hire a small boy. The rest of the work I will do myself. Quite happily. You know, a doctor once told me, you will earn immense wealth in the business of black things." Mother said, "A doctor said that?" "That's the thing, not a doctor, an astrologer said it. My mistake."

I thought about the matter silently for a moment. Wouldn't be bad. If Father can get the coal business booming, then when I grow up I'll open a kerosene depot. Huge demand. What

lines form just to get oil. Later when there's more money, then I'll open a petrol pump. Petrol pump buildings are very beautiful! Surrounded by large glass panels all around. Beautifully painted. Colorful cars come all day. The smell of petrol is so nice too! How would it be to apply petrol on the body instead of perfume?

Father stood up. As if his dream just broke. Looking around he said, "So today is a holiday! Ah, how good it feels? Come Buro, let's go for a walk from the ashram. Going there makes the mind feel incredibly good." Mother said, "Doesn't Buro have studies?" "Why wouldn't he? I have studies too. Do you know how much homework I have pending?" "Your homework?" "You don't know. That's a very secret matter. My father was my teacher. As it is, he didn't have much time, he would teach me while walking, while talking. For instance, while applying oil, he taught me tenses. Present, past, future, present continuous, participle. Do you remember how he taught you math while sitting down to eat? All the homework my father gave me in my childhood, it wasn't all completed, you know. I used to shirk. My father never scolded me, though. His method of discipline was different. He would just say, 'You didn't do what I told you,' and keep looking at me. Large eyes behind thick glass spectacles. Suddenly, you'd see drops of water falling down both cheeks. Oh, the pain I felt then! My insides would twist."

This time Mother sat down. She had been standing all this while. I sat down too. Father also sat down again. Pinka is sleeping. Tucked near Pinka, Push is sleeping soundly like a human baby. On the southern wall, my Grandmother's picture is shining. A small dot of sandalwood paste on her forehead. Ah, what fun! Today is a holiday! Mother said, "So many things come to mind! Speaking loudly has always been my habit. So one day he told me, 'Ma, try to practice speaking a little softly. You have so many virtues, if you can just fix this one little thing, you will be flawless.' So I used to try; but habits are hard to break! One day I was talking very loudly with Shikha's mother; he was sitting in the room writing notes. I went in later with tea. He looked at me. Those large eyes. Suddenly I see drops of tears. I asked, 'What happened, Father?' In a very calm, quiet voice he said, 'You couldn't do it!' Oh, how my heart sank that day!"

"How many such incidents happened in my life! You know the funny thing about childhood? You want to do everything except study; yet look, if you don't study in childhood, time won't stay stuck in childhood for your convenience your whole life. It will drag you and drop you right into old age. Time has no mercy, right? Time is time. Such a traveler, who never knows how to rest under a tree for a moment on any day. If you can walk with it, good; if not, time will leave you behind. If I had learned to understand this in my childhood, I could have been a much better person today." "Do you still do your homework, Father?" "You know, I have discovered something. As long as someone is a student, there is great happiness in living. There is a reason to live. I am learning, I am getting to know so many things, the world is coming into my grasp. It's not that days are coming and going pointlessly. Every day I am living to learn something. Every day I feel, let me live a few more days, learn a few more things. I am still my father's student. He gives me homework every day. Math, history, English, geography. I have a routine, notebooks, books, pencils, erasers, a geometry instrument box, even a small tiffin box. In that box, my mother still packs food for me, and reminds me, 'Remember to eat your tiffin, son'. How happy I am, how do I explain it! I have everything, nothing is lost." "Where is your school, Father?" "In our attic." "Is that why you carefully hung your childhood slate on the wall there?" "That is my blackboard." Mother said,

"Is that why you stay on the roof until one or two in the night?" "Why wouldn't I! My school is in session then." "Do you have exams, Father?" "A lot. Weekly, monthly, quarterly, half-yearly, annual. In this half-yearly, I missed coming first by just one mark." "When will you grow up, Father? When will you leave school and enter college?" "No dear, I will study in school my whole life. Do you know why? The foundation of a person's life is built in school. You can stay very close to the teachers. College is a club for over-ripe (precocious) guys. I don't want to over-ripen. I want to remain the child of the school, the teenager, my whole life. Do you know how hard I've tried to guard not growing up? When I see overly worldly people, I run away. It scares me. They will gossip. They will talk about money. They will talk about property and assets. They will talk about greed. This didn't happen, that didn't happen, they'll completely poison the mind. My father used to say, try to stay a hundred arm-lengths away from materialistic people. The mind is a bag. You can keep diamonds and jewels in it, or you can keep bricks and stones in it too. I didn't listen to his words then. The words I didn't listen to, I try to follow to the letter now. As long as I can remain a student, that's how long there is happiness."

Father started putting on his clothes. Mother asked, "Where are you heading off to now, dressed up?" "I'll take Buro for a spin. I won't have this time every day. There is a prison called an office; there are some people there like the God of Death, you have to dress up like a corpse in a coffin and hand yourself over to them. You see, the office is a morgue. Corpses of the day are laid out."

A quiet road winds its way behind our house. Our house is very interesting. The front is the city. The back is a village. There are large fields. Twin ponds. Thatched houses. The Ganges is on one side. A little further ahead are the large garden-houses of the old days. Ancient temples. Ashrams. So beautiful. Father exclaims from time to time, 'Kingly, kingly.'

Stepping out of the house, Father took a few deep breaths, "Can you smell the flowers, Buro?" "I can. What flower is it?" "Wood Champa (Kath-champa). An extraordinary smell. You see, a flower never complains."

We both walked and arrived at the edge of the twin ponds. Like two mirrors lying side by side where the trees had stepped down to bathe. The sky was looking at its reflection in it. "You know Buro, when I come this way, my mind goes crazy. What kind of breeze is blowing here, tell me?" "What breeze, Father?" "You don't understand? Auspicious breeze. Haven't you read Thakur Ramakrishna's Kathamrita!" "I'll grow up a little more, then I'll read it." "Then what will you read now?" "School books, storybooks, comics." "No, no, that won't do. You must read the Kathamrita from this age, read Swami Vivekananda's writings. When a tree is small, that is when you must put fertilizer at its roots. Once the tree grows big and the roots go deep into the soil, there is no worry. The tree can then gather its own essential nutrients. Do you know what Thakur used to say? When an earthen pot is soft, pliable, and raw, you can give it shape, carve designs on it. After it is baked red as vermilion in the fire, hard and ringing, you can't do anything to it anymore. If you try, it breaks. Understand, silly! Make a life such that people remember you for a hundred years, two hundred years, three hundred years, five hundred years. Let your picture hang on the walls of all homes. May all mothers tell their sons, be like him. Can you imagine, Sri Chaitanya was born five hundred years ago in that distant Navadvipa. Even today, people all over the world worship him. People from foreign lands rush to Mayapur and become monks."

"Father, what will I become, tell me? What would be good to become?" "Don't do a job, it's slavery. My father hated jobs. Study very well and become a monk. Build a body like Swami Vivekananda. Build a mind by reading the Vedas, Vedanta, Gita, and Bhagavatam. Then wear saffron, become a monk, and shake the whole world. Shake it."

I quite liked the idea of becoming a monk too. This handsome, bright appearance. A turban on the head. A thick staff in hand. From one country to another. From that country to yet another. I am traveling. Giving speeches. Everyone is calling me Maharaj, Maharaj. What fun! When I grow up and finish my studies, I won't do a 10-to-5 job. I will become a monk. My grandmother had told me, "Buro, keep the house exactly like an ashram."

I was about to say something, when Father said, "Hush! Look there, how still the kingfisher is sitting on the branch of the tree. This is what you call *sadhana* (meditation/practice)." "Meditation for what, Father?" "Meditation for fish. Just watch what happens." The kingfisher is truly a colorful bird. Suddenly it swooped down, touched the water with a swoosh, and flew up. A silver fish was flapping in its beak. What a beautiful technique!

When we reached the ashram, the evening *arati* was going on in the temple. A glass temple. The spire was glowing like a gem against the sky. Inside, idols of Thakur Ramakrishna and Mother Sarada side by side. Behind them, the three-eyed Mother Goddess was smiling. Right on the bank of the Ganges. Small bells were tied to the branches of the bushy cherry trees. They were swaying in the breeze, making a tinkling sound. The founder of this ashram used to sit and meditate in a room; placing his hand on the wall of that room from the garden side, Father said, "You know, when he meditated, you couldn't keep your hand on the wall of this room. Your hand would burn. The wall would crack. How beautiful! Tell me Buro! How beautiful the practice of devotion is! If I ever get money, I will buy a pair of cymbals and wooden clappers, and sit under our Krishnachura tree morning and evening and chant the name of Ram like Tulsidas. While doing so, one day Lord Ramachandra will come and reveal himself to me. With Mother Sita and brother Lakshman by his side. Then I won't care for anyone in the world. No jobs, nothing. No big boss, no small boss. Just 'He is in supreme bliss who knows the Blissful Mother. Loss, no loss, eating, not eating...'" Tears came to Father's eyes. Water streamed down his cheeks.

It was morning at the ashram, so there was hardly anyone around. Otherwise, what would people think seeing Father cry! They would think I am a bad boy who caused my father a lot of pain. I don't study. An animal. Right at this moment, a squirrel fluffed up its already puffy tail, and making a *pirik-pirik* sound, ran up and down the trunk of a tree. What joy it had! Father loves squirrels very much. A very favorite animal. He often tells me stories about Dwijendranath Tagore. He was almost like a monk. He used to sit in the garden, and squirrels would play, lifting their tails, from this shoulder to that. Birds would land on his head. Butterflies would fly onto the tip of his nose. We have squirrels in our garden too. Father was so offended one day! "Why aren't squirrels climbing on my shoulder! There are so many birds in the trees, why aren't they landing on my head!" Mother said, "How surprising! If they don't land, what can I do?" Father said, "I have not a bit of jealousy in my heart. I don't even kill an ant. Why would they fear me! And what more can I do. Every day I leave water for them, fruits, nuts. What more than this can I do!" Father was almost in tears from hurt pride that day. Finally, Mother explained, there is a big difference between the birds

and squirrels of those days and the birds and squirrels of today. Humans have changed, they have changed too. Why are you getting upset over nothing! With great difficulty, Mother reasoned with Father that day. Otherwise, he would have stopped eating over this. Mother says, your father is even more of a child than you are. Does anyone ever lose their mind over why a squirrel isn't climbing on them?

That squirrel was climbing up and down the tree just three feet away from Father. Father was watching in amazement. A different kind of expression came over his face and eyes. I know what Father was thinking. He was thinking perhaps the squirrel would climb down and sit on his shoulder this time. Since it had come so close, what's the harm in coming a little closer! It didn't come in the end. Raising its tail with a *pirik-pirik* sound, it ran along the top of the wall and disappeared into the distance on some more important errand. Do squirrels ever run out of errands? Father looked at me with a somewhat strange expression. He said, "Did you see, did you see what happened? It came, but it didn't come." "He is very busy right now, Father. You know, they have a lot of work in the morning. Didn't you see his father calling him with a *pirik-pirik* from over there. What's his fault, tell me!"

The two of us sat in the pavilion on the banks of the Ganges. Open on all sides. The Ganges in front. A strong breeze was blowing. A mixed breeze. A little warm, a little cold. *Sonal* flowers were showering down continuously on the cemented courtyard in front. I was remembering my Grandmother so much. When I was even younger, I used to come for walks to this ashram holding Grandmother's hand frequently. There was a mound in the open field next to it. Grandmother loved mountains very much. She used to tell me so many stories about mountains. About the mountains she had climbed. What a striking appearance Grandmother had. Straight, erect. She never sat hunched over. She used to tell me often, 'Buro, never sit leaning forward. Always keep your spine straight. The spine is human health. The more you bend like a bow, the weaker you will become.' I remember everything Grandmother told me, and I am writing it all down in a notebook now. No matter what anyone says, I am holding my Grandmother's hand. I am still holding it. I tell the sky, don't let go of that hand. I tell the moon that floats in the clouds. I tell the trees. I tell the birds. I tell the Ganges. Before our eyes, the Ganges seemed like a rippling smile.

Father was sitting straight. The way people sit in meditation. Suddenly he said, "Buro, write." "Father, I don't have paper and pen." "Write on the pages of your mind with the pen of memory." "Speak." "You must be honest. In work, in words, in character. Have you written it?" "I have." "Now write, you have to learn to hold yourself and to let go. Have you written it?" "Could you explain it a bit?" "Of course. Kite, spool, and string. The mind is the kite, the string is the desire, and judgment is the spool. The mind-kite wants to fly, wants to rise. You are releasing the string of desire freely. In which sky, on which wind it will float away and fall into what danger, no one knows. Immediately turn the spool of judgment and pull it back. This was probably a bit too hard for you." "No, Grandmother used to tell me things very much like this." "Then what's the worry! You are already quite advanced. Here, write. Do not envy! Do not be jealous. Write, look forward. Whatever was left behind, let it stay behind. Now write, do not mold your mind to the size of your body. Mold your body to the size of your mind." "That became a bit tough, Father." "It's not tough at all. The word 'tough' only exists in the dictionary of fools. I will explain it to you. Before that, write, I might forget. Intellect is greater than strength. Have you written it?" "Yes." "Now listen, the mind resides within the body, right! Does it or does it not?" "Yes, it does." "Five foot six inches, five foot eight, at

most six feet, this is the size of the body. Make sure the mind doesn't freeze to the size of that Kulfi ice cream mold. The mind should be like a giant, like a mountain, like a Garjan tree. Massive. And the body will try to hold that mind. The mind will say touch the moon, the body will go and touch it. The mind will say catch Everest, the body will catch it. The body is then not six feet, it is six miles, six hundred thousand miles. Understood?" "Clear." "The lame crosses mountains. Remember?" "I do." "Close the notebook. Listen Buro, does your inside feel very restless? Does it?" "Sometimes it does." "Why does it?" "It feels like every day just turns into night so quickly!" "Shake hands. You caught it. You caught the sorrow. What agony, tell me! Everything is getting old. What is born today, dies tomorrow. What can be done, tell me?" "What more will you do, Father? Nobody could do anything anyway. Look at this, just two years ago on a day like this Grandmother was here. We were four, today we are three. Tell me, does it feel good?" "Bah. Nothing feels good at all!" "Come on, let's go home now. Mother is alone. What is Push doing, what is Pinka doing?" "Let's go then. Surviving is all about holding onto these one or two good feelings."

The hotter the sun got, scorching everything around, the happier Father became. He just kept saying, 'Oh, what heat! Where did the Sun God get so much heat?' Dust was swirling occasionally. Dry leaves spun in circles and came down again. Father said, "You know Buro, today we will make the garden even more beautiful. We will dig a circle in the middle. We will pour water into it. We'll put small pebbles at the bottom. Periwinkle plants around the edges. We can't build a fountain. That's a matter of a lot of money. Birds will come to bathe in that water in the afternoon. You will be able to see it. I won't be able to see it. My whole day will be stuck in a damp office in Kolkata." "Father, you don't like doing your job, right? Then why do you do it?" "For you all. If I don't work, how will you grow up?"

‖২‖ (Part II)

Shyamol is the son of a very rich man. He talks big. Comes to school in expensive clothes, not uniform. He even wears perfume. Always keeps a hundred, two hundred rupees with him. We all know his father is not honest. He runs illegal businesses. Many of us don't mix with him. He disgusts us. Many others hang around him a lot. Rich man's son, eats well, so he looks a bit big and burly. Many even call him 'Dada' (older brother). They make a big fuss saying Shyamol-da, Shyamol-da.

That day after school, Shyamol said, "Buro, want to smoke an imported cigarette?" Hearing this, I was flabbergasted, "You smoke cigarettes?" "Why wouldn't I! Do you know the price of imported cigarettes? Twenty-five rupees a packet. My father blows four packets daily. And we all drink imported beer together at night. Learn to be modern, Buro. Learn to be modern. Your father is a peasant, you are a peasant too." "Shyamol, watch your mouth. Learn to speak politely. Show off your money at home." Shyamol laughed a *hya-hya* laugh and said, "You little bat."

I was not prepared. Suddenly he gave me such a push that I was thrown backward. My nose got smashed. My upper lip got cut. Blood trickled down and soaked the chest of my shirt. I

couldn't do anything. Shyamol and his sycophants left laughing like a pack of demons. My friends, those who love me, came running. Khokon said, "Oh no, your lip is cut, blood is coming out of your nose too. Come on, let's go to the doctor's clinic." I was angry not at Shyamol, but at myself. Why am I weak. Suppressing my anger I said, "There is no need. I will go home and fix it. This is exactly what should happen to a boy like me." "He has a lot of physical strength. He eats good stuff, after all!" I gave no answer. Father told me the other day, don't make your mind the size of your body, make your body the size of your mind. I will see about this Shyamol. I will see very soon. I will make him fall at my feet and apologize. Only then is my name Buro.

Mother said, "My goodness, where did you come from all cut up like this? Who put you in such a state?" I kept quiet about it. I really wanted to tell Mother everything. If I could have told her, my heart would have felt much lighter; but I didn't say it. I kept it to myself. Insults have to be stored away. Stacked up like bricks. A tooth for a tooth. A nail for a nail.

When Father returned from the office and saw everything, he said, "It's nothing, just a scrape from the road, let's go get a tetanus shot." As soon as we stepped out on the street, he said, "You got beaten up?" "How did you know?" "By reading Sherlock Holmes. Holmes used to say, if a man has strong reasoning power, he needs nothing else. I know how you walk, your nature. Observation. If you observe a person well, three-fourths of their character can be known. You are calm, steady, and careful. You couldn't have just fallen like this." "He shoved me unexpectedly and threw me down." "You took a hit, what should you do now?" "You tell me?" "No, no, the solution to anyone's problem lies with them alone. Many such blows will come. You have to handle them. You have to defend yourself. The body will take hits. The mind will take hits." Father was walking on one side of the road. Suddenly he moved over, put a hand on my shoulder, and said, "A physical blow must be handled with the body. A mental blow with the mind." "Once these cuts heal, I will go to Bishu-da to learn exercise. Will you buy me chickpeas and sugarcane jaggery?" "Certainly. You will eat chickpeas, jaggery, and raw turmeric. You will see how your physique changes; but what will you do for your mind?" "You take my mind." "Can you give it completely?" "Of course." "Shake hands. Though before that, you have to fix your own mind." "Your mind is perfectly fine." "No dear, it is still a bit weak. It has cracks. Fractures. Actually, you know, I don't like this job anymore. If I could find something honorable where I could live with my head held high, you'd see, my appearance would change completely. A person becomes nothing without freedom. A slave acquires the mind of a slave, a master a master's, a saint a saint's."

My nose was still bleeding a little bit. My upper lip was swollen like a drum. My knee was smashed. Even now, if I try to bend my leg, it hurts and burns. It hurt my body, true, but it hurt my mind much more. I haven't been able to forget it since that afternoon. Until I can take revenge for this, there is no peace.

As soon as the doctor asked, "How did you get cut?" Father just blurted out everything. Shameful. It would have been better not to say anything. Father is again terribly truthful. He never tells a lie without reason. While washing the syringe with spirit, the doctor said, "These days, schools and colleges seem like dens of thugs. Until a boy returns home, one lives in terror. Just a few days ago, they pushed my son down the stairs. Rolled from the second floor to the ground floor. He's lying with his leg in a plaster cast." The doctor gave the injection, placed the syringe on the tray in front, and said, "This is going to bother you for a

few days now. This is what you call inviting trouble when you're in peace. I'm writing it down, take some medicine." Then he looked at Father and said, "Now if you go and complain to the father of that monkey of a boy, you know what he will say? He'll say, 'Good, he deserved it.' Now everyone has to learn self-defense techniques like in Europe and America. After this, you'll see we all have to carry firearms. Good riddance. The state of India, the land of Vedanta! Anyway, whatever is happening, let it happen. Let the leaders figure it out. If I can somehow manage to pass another ten years and escape, I'll be saved." Father asked, "Where will you escape to? Abroad?" "No, no, not abroad, in my own country. To my own land. Back to where I came from. Let me go, Mother, let me live. I've learned my lesson well. Now bid me a safe farewell, Mother, let me walk into the light. These days, if things go even slightly wrong, do you know what language the patients use? 'I'll smash your face in, I'll send you to hell.' Bengalis have learned to beat people up, sir. They even grab their fathers and beat them. They humiliate their elders."

As he was speaking, a patient entered the clinic. A bangle on his wrist. A medallion around his neck. Wearing a zebra t-shirt. Leaning on the table, he said, "What medicine did you give my mother? It's been three days and the fever shows no sign of leaving. Are you treating her or just keeping her hanging? You have a very bad reputation, sir. One of these days I'll bring the boys and smash up your clinic. Hand over the real stuff now. It's been three days." The doctor looked at Father and said, "What was I just telling you!" Then he looked at the boy and said, "Your mother, brother, has typhoid. It takes a month to cure. Even my father wouldn't have the power to cure it in three days." Supporting the doctor, Father said, "Typhoid takes a month, brother. Certain diseases have a timeframe, like smallpox, influenza, dengue, typhoid. You can't bully doctors over this." The boy rolled his eyes and said, "Stop, you don't need to act as a broker."

Hearing the boy's reply, my head absolutely boiled over. Insulting my father! I need to grow up as fast as I can. Then I'll catch them and beat them. There is only one answer to this kind of talk: an undercut to the lower jaw. Let it hang open for a month. Father tried to speak so nicely, and this was the reply!

The doctor opened the drawer of his table, took out a hundred-rupee note, held it out to the boy, and said, "Here, take this, brother. I have seen your mother for three days. Out of that, you paid my visiting fee for one day, two days are pending. And my prescribed medicine has been taken for three days. Take this hundred. I'm actually giving you extra. Please go. Treating your mother is not possible for me. You show her to another doctor." The boy snatched the money. Stuffing it in his pocket, he said, "All these quack doctors have set up shop in this neighborhood. We have to drive all of them out of here. Picking the pockets of the working masses to build cars and houses!" A second boy was standing outside on the street. He shouted, "What happened, boss? Should we scare him a little?" "No need. I am still alive." Pulling his shirt collar up a couple of inches with two fingers and puffing out his chest, the boy walked out.

Father said, "What did you do! You gave him the money! You can't practice medicine like this. You can't be afraid." "It's not fear. There is a Bengali proverb, right, 'Peace is better than happiness', this is like that. And I have also made up my mind, I will practice for another five years with a few select families, then I'll go to my son in Philadelphia. If you sit in my clinic for one day, the picture of society you will see, it will make you feel too, he who flees,

survives. Do you know, the other day at a patient's house, they robbed me of everything." "What? What are you saying?" "It was almost one in the morning. They took me from my house crying and pleading. Practically fell at my feet. I didn't know the boy. And these days who knows anyone anyway! They are all new faces. The old faces are almost lost. Then I saw the patient and everything was fake. Near Dasbagan, near a locked-out factory, they took me and snatched whatever money I had on me. My watch was gone, stethoscope, blood pressure machine was gone. My son had brought a gold frame from America, they took those glasses right off my eyes. Pitch black darkness all around. I stood there like a blind man. Not a single person, not a policeman, no one anywhere. Poster after poster on the gates of the closed factory. On one side, the skeleton of a broken rickshaw." "If you see the boy later, wouldn't you recognize him?" "It wasn't one boy, it was three. And even if I recognize them, so what? Where is the witness! You can't do anything with the law. For lack of witnesses, criminals are murdering and walking out of jail with their chests puffed out. The law can do absolutely nothing. What we need now is a group. Sitting in a corner of the room crying 'it's lost, it's lost' won't do. That way, everything will be gone. Society has to be completely rebuilt. Nothing will happen just through laws, giving speeches, holding elections, changing governments. Four things are needed. Four legs. A human is also a four-legged animal. Education and culture are the two hands, and the two legs are livelihood and health. Character is the spine. But who will do all this? The spine is bent like a bow. The arms are thin and scrawny. Both legs are paralyzed. How much can you cure a child with rickets just by rubbing oil on them?" Looking at me with a smiling face, the doctor said, "You guys have arrived in very tough times. What will happen? It's time for us to go, you still have to drag on for many days, *babu*."

We both stepped down onto the street. I love the night so much! So many shops! So many lights. So many people. Father said, "Listen Buro, in this hot summer, on such a breezy night, do you know what one should buy?" "What? A garland of jasmine flowers?" "No, a sandy earthen pitcher, a hand fan, and rose apples. Water apples and *phalsa* berries. Come, there is the market! Let's buy them. It will be fun. It will feel like there is a *puja* at home today." "It hurts me a lot to walk, Father. Besides, didn't Grandmother tell you not to waste money? I still remember that English phrase, waste not, want not." "It's impossible to deal with you. You've become wiser than even me. Let's go home then. What, should we take a rickshaw?" "No. Grandmother told us, never travel riding on someone else's shoulders." "That is true, of course. My father lives on in you. Let's go then, step by step."

We started walking. I feel like a fever is coming on. Feeling somewhat chilly. The park is on our left. A man has lit a small kerosene lamp and is selling *phuchka* (pani puri). Everyone has surrounded him in a circle. Sal-leaf bowls in their hands. A pinched, water-filled phuchka drops into the bowl and they pop it into their mouths. A picture-perfect scene. My mouth is watering. Father exclaimed, "You know, the moment you said you couldn't walk anymore, I remembered a story. Come, let's sit in the park, and I'll tell you the story." "If we sit in the park it'll get late, won't it Father? Mother will worry." "Listen, we'll only sit for fifteen to twenty minutes. When do we ever sit in the park anyway! We pass by it every day. We don't even look back. The park also feels anger, feels hurt pride. We will sit on that broken bench. We'll look at the sky above us once. So many stars looking at us from so far away! Then I'll tell you the story. Then we'll go home. There is no hassle in this."

The bench was still warm from the day's sun. Father is looking at the sky with his neck tilted up. Truly, the sky looks like a massive block of rock candy. A gathering of stars. Orion leaning in the west, his dog following behind. Father started the story.

"What can't great souls achieve with the power of their minds? An incident from the life of Swami Abhedananda. He was in Almora then. One afternoon he went out of the ashram for a walk. Walking and walking, crossing ascents and descents, he went very far. The sun is slowly setting. Now he will return. A jungle path. Tigers and bears come out at night. He quickened his pace. On the downward slope of the path, he suddenly slipped and fell. He fell quite a way down. The bone in the front of his leg broke from hitting a rock. You understand, Buro, the shin bone broke and protruded out like a broken bamboo splinter. There was no one anywhere around. Jungle. Mountains. Small and large rocks. And a walking trail. Evening is falling fast. Incredible pain. You can imagine what the pain of a broken bone is like! He has to return to the ashram somehow. What will he do! Jai Thakur. Jai Ramakrishna. He withdrew his mind from his leg." "What does that mean, Father?" "That is a kind of yoga, son. The mind is everything. Our sadness, pain, burning, agony, we feel everything through the mind. You have seen ants, right?" "Wow, haven't I seen ants! Every afternoon in our garden I only see ants. Marching in a line, swarming along. From the base of this tree to the base of that tree. Carrying loads on their backs. Like pilgrims going to bathe at the Kumbh Mela." "Do you know how they find out about sugar? First, one ant goes out for a stroll. Going this way, going that way. Wandering around. Suddenly it sees some jaggery or sugar lying somewhere. First it sniffs to see what the thing is. Sticks out its tiny tongue and tastes it a bit. But it will not eat the whole thing. It absolutely won't. Even if you beg it, it won't eat it. It will now frantically head back. You know ants, bees, they don't do anything without their colony. Now it sees, its colony is coming in a line. Haven't you seen, a whole line of ants is coming, and just one single ant is coming from the opposite direction, and it stops in front of everyone and says something with its antennae. It gives everyone that news. At such-and-such latitude and such-and-such longitude, some sugar is lying there. Brothers, let's go, let's go, go quickly." "You are exactly right, Father. Every day I see that scene in the garden. A line of ants going one way and a single ant going the opposite way. Stopping in front of each one and bumping heads." "What seemed like head-bumping to you, is actually just that one message. Brothers, I have found it, come quickly. The mind is also like that ant. Wandering all over the body. Wherever it sees a disturbance, it continuously sends messages to the main headquarters in the brain. And we thrash about in agony. If you don't let the mind-ant go to the place of pain and send it somewhere else instead, you will see an amazing thing. No pain, no ache, no comfort, no happiness, no joy. If you can master the technique of living, what a wonderful place the world is, Buro! A terrific place. Only, you know, you have to bring your mind completely under your control. You are still young, you won't understand all this yet. I am telling you, so listen. Who can say, today we two are sitting side by side on a park bench. A year from now, who knows where either of us will be. Like take your Grandmother! Just the other day she was here, today she is not. You know, people meet people in life only once. Your Grandmother was my mother only once. And never, never again will she be. No matter how much I cry. Once, everything is just for once." "When you say these things it hurts me a lot, Father. Why are you telling me this?" "Do you know why I am saying it? So your mind becomes strong. Thakur Ramakrishna used to say, when the earthen pot is raw, whatever shape or form you need to give it, give it in that raw state. After it is fired and becomes hard and ringing, nothing more can be done. If you try to do anything then, it just shatters with a *thun* sound. I have to paint your raw mind with the

color of renunciation (*Vairagya*) right from now." "What is renunciation, Father?" "Being in everything yet not being in it. Not clinging to anything. Not going crazy over worldly life. When you were very young, during Durga Puja, your mother had a strong desire to dress you in a dhoti and a silk panjabi. With great effort, I searched and bought one. After we put it on you, what an attitude you threw! Going here, going there. If anyone touched you, you got angry. If they said 'take it off', you burst into tears. An hour later, you were found wandering around completely naked, having crumpled it all up and thrown it aside. This is called renunciation. No sorrow or happiness over anything. If it happens, it happens; if it doesn't, it doesn't. Read the Kathamrita, Buro. Don't delay anymore. Thakur Ramakrishna used to say, live in the world like a mud-eel. The mud-eel lives in the mud, but mud doesn't stick to its body."

When Father says these things, his face and eyes seem to overflow with happiness and joy. I might be wrong, but it feels as if a fragrance of flowers is coming from Father's body. At these times, Father seems unfamiliar to me. As if I fail to recognize him. I saw it once in a movie. Ramakrishna is asking Swami Vivekananda, 'Tell me, who are you?' I also feel like asking Father, tell me, who are you?

After sitting quietly for a while, Father said, "The crowd has thinned, want to eat phuchka, Buro?" "No, Father, you should never eat phuchka. If Mother finds out, there will be no saving us. Mother says, that pot with tamarind water, sometimes mice and rats fall into it. Don't eat phuchka, Father. Mother said she will make it at home one day." "On God?" "On God." "How will she make it? How will she puff up such tiny puris?" "She will puff them up perfectly. Mother is very intelligent. Do you know, she can do multiplication in her head. She will make phuchka this Saturday." "Shake hands. I will eat fifty. No, not fifty, twenty-five. How many will you eat?" "Minimum a hundred." "Don't eat that many Buro. You will get sick." "Then thirty."

After that, we got up. The road had become very deserted. When Jogen-da starts making rasgullas in his shop on our street, that's when I know the day is over. Father says a year is a flock of three hundred and sixty-five birds. Every day one flies away. You cannot keep this bird caged in any cage.

‖৩‖ (Part III)

That afternoon I went to Bishu-da's gym (akhara). There is a courtyard. On one side is a massive Kadam tree. There are parallel bars. Roman rings. Inside the enclosed courtyard, yoga and exercise. Further over, in a large fenced-in area, judo, karate, kung fu. Just as I was entering calling "Bishu-da, Bishu-da," a terrifying shout, "Yaa-hoo," followed immediately by a sharp *thwack* sound. I got quite scared. Oh my God! The sound came from the inner fenced area. I heard Bishu-da's voice, "Excellent, excellent." I thought someone had killed someone. Hearing Bishu-da's voice gave me courage. I peeked inside and saw a huge mat laid out. Bishu-da was standing wearing a loose white uniform. In front of him was another boy. He was also wearing a uniform like Bishu-da's. Three or four others were sitting to one

side. Two were standing on the far side, throwing punches into the air in various styles. I stood quietly for a while. Bishu-da had now moved quite a distance away from the boy standing in front of him. Suddenly he made a sound, *Yap*. His right leg flew up like lightning and came down, and I saw the boy thrown aside. He didn't stay down, though. Rolling once, he immediately stood up, then ran over and, with a terrifying sound, did something to Bishu-da; Bishu-da was thrown back, and as he fell he said, "Superb, superb." I stood to one side, mouth hanging open, watching it all, and thinking to myself, oh father, what a spectacle! If I took one hit like that, I wouldn't be able to get up again. I'd lie there for seven days.

Bishu-da suddenly caught sight of me. Having fought for so long, his face and eyes were absolutely blood-red. Like a statue of burnt brass. He came over to me and asked, "Hey, why are you standing here looking so scared? What happened?" "I have come to you. I have a lot to say." "What is it, speak. I will honor whatever you say. Your grandfather was my teacher, my exercise guru." "Let's go to your room." Bishu-da looked at the boys and said, "Don't stop. Practice, warm up your bodies, warm up." The boys immediately started jumping and throwing punches in the air. Some started doing somersaults on the mat. We came to Bishu-da's room. A thick blanket was spread over a wooden cot. Pictures of famous bodybuilders on the walls. Also, Mother Kali, Mother Durga. Sri Krishna holding the Sudarshana Chakra. Various physical training equipment all around. On the cot, there was also a harmonium. This room is Bishu-da's kingdom. He told me, "Sit." I sat on the edge of the cot. Feeling a little fearful. What if Bishu-da hears everything, laughs out loud, and says, 'Buro, with this body you can't do it! You just do free-hand exercises for three or four years now'—then everything is ruined. I don't have the patience to wait three or four years. By then our school will be over. Shyamol will graduate. Rich guy, he'll probably go off to England or something.

Bishu-da lit an incense stick. He stuck two sticks into the incense holder in front of the picture of his guru. The whole room filled with a sweet fragrance. I sat quietly. Watching to see what else Bishu-da does. I respect Bishu-da very much. As handsome as he looks, so beautiful is his physique. And equally beautiful is his character. He was also exceptionally good at studies. A doctor himself. A very good doctor. In my father's words, he who has it, has it all. He who doesn't, has nothing. After offering the incense, Bishu-da took out two lumps of something from a red plastic container. Giving one lump to me, he said, "Put it in your mouth." He tossed the other lump into his own mouth. Putting it in my mouth, I realized it was palm sugar candy (tal-michri). Bishu-da sat on one side of the cot and said, "Understand Buro, after energy leaves the body, one must eat a little sweet. It reduces fatigue a lot. It soothes the body. Sugar candy is the best sweet. Especially palm candy. Do you want a little more?" "No Bishu-da. I am done." "Speak now, what can I do for you?" "Give me strength." "The way you said that was a bit strange! I will give you strength? Am I the master of giving strength? God will give strength." "I will exercise under you. I will learn jujutsu, karate." "Why did you suddenly get such a desire?" "I am going to catch a boy and beat him up." "What is that again?" "That boy studies with me. Rich man's son. A lot of physical power. He tortures me for no reason. If I can give him a good thrashing one day, he will cool down." "Tell me the name of that boy. Tell me where he lives. I will go and cool him down." "No Bishu-da, I have to do that job with my own hands. I need strength. There isn't just one boy like that, there are many more." "A blow for a blow, violence for violence, that is not the path, the path is forgiveness." "Then why do you teach all this?" "Hmm, you have raised a good point." "My grandmother used to tell me, 'Look Buro, non-violence,

forgiveness, these are very high ideals, not for everyone. Animals won't understand. Those who are brutes, they have to be suppressed with force. Trying to forgive them will mean weakness.'" "Hmm, she spoke the truth indeed." "Then teach me." "Let's see, place your right hand on my right hand." I gripped Bishu-da's right hand with my right hand. "Now, squeeze. Use all the strength you have. Press. Apply pressure. Harder, even harder." I gripped Bishu-da's hand with all the strength I had. My teeth were grinding. Bishu-da asked, "Are you breathing?" "Yes, I am." "Take a breath, hold your breath, and press." I did so. At one point, I ran out of breath. My grip loosened. I couldn't do it anymore. Bishu-da said, "Good. Very good. This is called applying force. Human strength, human power, which you want to use on another, is sometimes fluid, sometimes solid. And mental strength is a wave of electricity. A spark. Force has to be channeled like this." "Do I have strength, Bishu-da?" "Yes, you do. Wait, let me test your mind." Bishu-da got up, brought out a rope, and threw it in front of me. "Here, tear it into two pieces." The rope wasn't very thick. A jute rope, but pulling it, I found it quite strong. I didn't think I could break it. "Bishu-da, this is extremely strong. It is impossible for me to break this into two." Bishu-da's fair, handsome face flushed red, then returned to normal. In a grave voice, he said, "The word 'impossible', Buro, is only found in the dictionary of the incompetent. Kneel down. Hold the rope near your chest with both hands. Hold it, exhale, inhale, and pull. Say in your mind, I will not lose. Under no circumstances will I lose. Defeat means mental death. The shape the mind takes after being defeated a thousand, a million times, is called the mind of the defeated. In English, they call it a 'defeatist mentality'. Then that mind has only one thing to say: I cannot do this. To forget the phrase 'I cannot do this,' imagine that phrase does not exist in your language. You have never heard such a phrase. Now, try. Try, try." Bishu-da's voice suddenly changed. I pulled and tugged at the rope but couldn't do anything. It was cutting into my hands, yet it wasn't snapping. I was running out of breath. Bishu-da said, "First you will inhale, take in air and swell up. Do not exhale. Then close your eyes, focus completely, and tear it. Try to tear it. Imagine your life depends on it." He told the story of the hero who won his freedom by shooting an apple on his son's head with an arrow. He said, "When a man runs in fear for his life, his speed surpasses even an Olympic sprinter." Closing my eyes and holding my breath, I was trying with all my might, but couldn't achieve anything. My inside had become so hot, every time I exhaled, the area near my nose and upper lip felt like it was burning. Finally, throwing the rope on the floor, I burst into tears.

Bishu-da was sitting in front of me on the cot with his legs dangling. Placing a hand on my head, he said, "What happened, Buro?" "I couldn't do it at all, Bishu-da." "Why are you crying?" "Because I failed." "What happens if you fail?" "If you fail, you feel ashamed." "Anything else?" "It feels like I got stuck in one place. No path to move forward. If you fail an exam, all your friends leave you behind and go to the higher class. Those who were below you come up and catch up to you." "Which means, everyone is moving, and you got stuck in one place." "I couldn't tear the rope, that means you won't teach me anymore." "But I am unable to do it, Bishu-da! It got stuck at one point." "But I won't give up easily. I will make you tear that rope." "No, Bishu-da. Look here, blood has clotted in my hand." "I want exactly that blood to clot. I want to harden those soft, delicate hands. You take that rope home. The day you can tear it, come to me."

I walked out of Bishu-da's gym with a heavy heart. I didn't dare ask, if I cannot tear it, should I not come? Evening is almost here. So many people on the street. Some going this way, some that way. No one knows my inner thoughts. Mother gave me a one-rupee coin in the

morning. Right in front is the Mother Kali temple. Bowing to the Mother, placing the coin on the offering plate, I sat quietly looking unblinkingly into the Mother's eyes for a long time. In my mind, I must have said at least a thousand times: Mother Kali, give me strength. Mother Kali, give me strength. The priest who conducts the puja was sitting on a mat to one side. What a beautiful appearance he had! Such a large round mark on his forehead. Thick, bushy hair. Suddenly he asked me, "Have you been initiated (*diksha*)?" "What is initiation?" "Have you taken a mantra from a guru?" "No, sir." "Then what were you muttering to yourself?" "What is chanting (*japa*)?" "Saying the same mantra over and over again. One hundred and eight times. A thousand and eighty times." "I was saying, Mother Kali, give me strength." "That is chanting. You said Mother Kali, just attach a seed-mantra (*bija-mantra*) before it and it's done." "What is a seed-mantra?" "A single syllable, which has a sound, a resonance. All mantras are concentrated within it. When you take initiation, you will know." "Why should I take initiation?" "Otherwise, how will your inner self awaken! You must take initiation. Your signs are good. Let me see your right hand." As soon as I offered my right hand in front of him, he was startled. He said, "What is this! Did someone beat you with a cane?" "No sir, I was trying to tear a rope. For a long time. That's why my hand is in this state." "You could have just cut it with scissors." "No sir, that won't do. I have to tear it by pulling with my hands." "My son, how terrible. The rope has cut right into your hand. Your hands will hurt. They will burn when you eat. Before going to bed at night, apply some burnt oil from the lamp. Go, wash your hands and come back. I will give you *prasad*." "Why did you want to see my hand?" "Shouldn't I see? A boy of your age sitting still in the Mother's temple for half an hour. By what *samskara* (past conditioning)! Shouldn't I see!" "What is *samskara*?" "Wow, you have a great thirst for knowledge! You will succeed. I don't know who you are, but I am telling you, many people will know you later by my Mother's will. Listen, *samskara* is a good state of mind, which a person brings with them. Like suppose, you come to the Mother and say, Mother, give me strength. Someone else might go to a doctor and say, prescribe a tonic so I get strength. Someone, say, respects and reveres their parents deeply. Someone else doesn't care at all. Someone, say, is enchanted hearing a song, someone else is terribly annoyed. It is all a matter of past lives. Some run to saints, some to devils." "What is a past life?" "Westerners don't believe in past lives. We do. Do you think you have been born for the first time! No, you have perhaps been born a thousand times, a million times before. Otherwise, think, someone plays the tabla or sitar incredibly well at the age of five. Draws very well. Solves difficult math problems. How do they do it! There is only one answer, they used to do these things in their past life. They have brought that knowledge into this life."

My grandmother's words came to mind then. Before leaving, she would sit late into the night just solving math problems. Notebook after notebook of only difficult math problems. I used to ask, Grandmother, for whom are you doing all this? She would say, for myself. I am building the foundation for my next life. I was small, I didn't understand all that then. Today, by the priest's words, I understand. I went round the back to wash my hands. A small courtyard. A *Kalke* flower tree. On one side, a stove. Lots of firewood. Earthen pots are kept there. A well with a pump attached. Everything is absolutely sparkling clean. I liked the place so much! I felt like staying here. The smell of flowers. The smell of incense. On one side, a pure white cat is sleeping. I checked its tail again to see if it was thick! Quite thick. Like a yak-tail whisk. If Father saw it, he would jump with joy. He would immediately say, come Buro, let's carry it in our arms. As soon as I poured a mug of water on my hands, they burned intensely. Oh my God! These two hands are going to make me suffer. What has Bishu-da done to me! The priest gave me a *sandesh*. Placed a hand on my head. Said,

"Come, let me chant for you a little." My whole body felt soothed. My eyes were closing. Lifting his hand from my head he said, "Go, things will be very good for you. Very good." I bowed down. My grandmother, my father, taught me, if you see such a person, bow down to the ground with devotion. Know that there is nothing like the blessing of elders. As I rose from bowing, the priest said, "Go, wash your hands again and come back. I will give you a flower from the Mother's feet. Always keep it with you."

As soon as I returned home, Mother said, "That you are growing up is becoming obvious now." "Why, Mother?" "You have started committing atrocities." "Meaning?" "You can't understand the meaning. What time is it? What time did you return?" "Listen Mother, my name is Buro. I was not born to commit atrocities. I was born to beat up the oppressors. Look here at my hands. Look at the condition of my hands." Mother was startled, "Did you come back beaten up again! This time it looks like you were caned!" "I knew you would think exactly that. Tell me, what is this!" "A rope. What are you doing with a rope?" "I have been trying to tear this for two hours. I couldn't tear it. That's why my hands are in this state." "Give it to me, I'll cut it with the *boti* (kitchen knife)." "That won't do, Mother. I have to tear it by pulling with my hands. That is my *sadhana*. My homework."

When Mother stares in amazement, her face looks so beautiful! If only my face were like Mother's. Two long eyebrows. Those two eyebrows have now become like bows. Eyes like Mother Durga's. Skin the color of Champa flowers. Such long arms. Grandmother used to say, those who have short arms, have small minds. Those who have long arms, reaching down to their knees, have minds like sages. Sri Chaitanya Dev had such long arms. Do you know what *Ajanulambita* means? Arms that touch the knees. I have never seen my mother wear dirty clothes. Always clean. If Mother sees anything dirty or unclean, she gets very angry. I have to change my shirt and pants twice a day. What I am wearing right now, everything has to be taken off and soaked in a bucket of surf-and-soap water. It will be washed tomorrow morning. "Here, lower your head, Mother Kali will bless you. Mother blessed me a little while ago." I listen to my mother, my mother listens to me. Mother lowered her head and said, "Give it, give the blessing." What beautiful hair Mother has! Pitch black. A little curly. In every way, my mother is so good! No one else has a mother like this. Grandmother used to say constantly, such a girl is one in a million. Touching the hibiscus flower to Mother's head, I said, "Mother Kali, keep my beautiful mother alive for a hundred years, Mother." "Save me, father, who will live for a hundred years! I will leave once you grow up a little. You know, it's better to leave while you still have strength." "Ah, is that so! I won't be able to live without you." I hugged Mother with both arms. Resting my head on Mother's chest and keeping my eyes closed feels so good. Mother's heart is beating near my ear. Mother's life. My grandmother loved listening to a song, 'My mother's sweet smile falls like moonlight on her face.'

Pinka is very jealous. He was sleeping under the bed. As soon as I hugged Mother, he came running. He probably thought I was beating Mother. He stood up putting his front two paws on Mother's body. Whining. Occasionally scolding in a sweet voice. Ah, as if Mother is his alone! Father returned quite late today. Entering with a huge cement flower pot, panting *heiyo heiyo, heiyo*. Mother said, "The day you'll be late, why don't you tell us?" "Would I have been late? It was because of this." "Why do you go to lift such a heavy thing all by yourself! What if you suddenly hurt your back! What was the need to buy this?" Placing the pot in a corner and dusting off his hands, Father said, "I will show you guys an incredible thing, a

bonsai. I will make a banyan tree bonsai. Where did Buro go! My little Buro." "Behind you, Buro standing, Father." "Grab my right arm and hang on it?" "I won't be able to, Father. Look at the condition of my hands." "What is this! How did you make such a design?" "I will tell you that later." Pinka is sniffing the pot, exhaling heavily. Letting out a low growl from inside. Father said, "The other thing I have brought! You will lose your minds when you see it." Mother said, "Then it's better not to see it. If we lose our minds it will be a huge disaster." "I brought an inflatable atlas. You know, you blow into it, and it swells up. Swelling up into a beautiful atlas. What fun!" "Where is it, Father? Where is it, Father?" "Patience, patience. In this shoulder bag of mine, the world is currently deflated inside a beautiful box. Wait, first let me change my dress, wash my hands and face, then I will inflate the world." Mother said, "How much money did you spend?" Immediately Father's face changed somewhat. Mother brings up money at such moments, it ruins Father's joy. Father said, "Not much. Just around a hundred rupees total for this pot and the atlas." "I cannot deal with you anymore. Father is gone. To whom will I complain about you! My brain isn't working anymore." "There is nothing to complain about. I didn't spend the household money. I am saving my tiffin money to buy these things. I bought five more pots like this and left them near the shop. I will bonsai lemon trees in them. I will do jackfruit. *Golancha*. Neem. You have no idea how beautiful a lemon tree bonsai looks." "That means you don't eat anything at the office in the afternoon! This time your health will break down." "Why would it? I eat two handfuls of rice extra in the morning for this reason. And on days I feel very hungry, you know what I do? A little distance from our office, there is a *chhatoo* (roasted gram flour) stall under a tree; I go there and say, mix some *chhatoo* well with salt and chili on a sal leaf, along with a piece of onion. Ah, what a taste! Absolutely fantastic. And it stays in the stomach for a long time too." "You have no sense of prestige or honor." "Why wouldn't I? Prestige and honor belong to others, they will give it to me. It's like a shirt that you can't buy and wear yourself. People will put it on you. Who told you that eating *chhatoo* takes away your honor and eating cutlets maintains it?" "What did you eat today?" "Horse's egg (Nothing)." "Do whatever your heart desires, I won't say anything more. Everyone has grown up, has sense, no one is a child anymore." Mother walked away with an angry face. Father said, "Why do you scold me so much! I am such a good boy! There is no boy like me!" I said, "He who calls himself great is not great, he whom people call great is great." "Well, he is great! I just said it. Don't make a fuss."

The inflatable atlas came out. Father's evening prayers were over. The earth's belly started swelling as he blew into it. Father was so happy puffing away! As it keeps swelling, he keeps saying, "Look there Buro, how clearly the continents are appearing. America, Africa, Asia, Europe. Blow Buro, blow." Soon it became a miniature earth. "It won't swell anymore, Father. It's swollen like a drum. Now you fit it." The stand, nuts, screws were scattered all around. He had been shown how to attach them. He forgot everything. Now he attaches this to that, then that to this, and keeps saying from time to time, "What happened Buro. This is upside down Buro!" Finally he said, "Call Mother." My mother, of course, has a very scientific mind. We don't need to call outsiders for small repair jobs in the house. If something goes wrong with the electricity, she fixes it herself. Mother stitches my shirts and pants. Mother was frying *luchis* in the kitchen. She said, "How can I go now!" Father was shouting continuously from the other room, "Be a dear and come once. Please, just come once." Mother looked at me with a despairing face and said, "What to do, tell me? Are you father and son going to drive me crazy together?" I had a vested interest too. I said, "What harm is there in going for five minutes, Mother?" "Then there's no point in having dinner tonight! Right?" Mother set the pan down with a *thak* sound. Puffed luchis on the skimmer. Pinka was sitting in front of

Father. Reaching out with a paw from time to time. Really wanted to, you know! Just wanted to test the air-filled globe if he got it. Father is saying, "Shame, don't do that Pinka, shame, don't do that." Next to Father's knee is Push, sometimes turning on his side, sometimes on his back, playing enthusiastically. He has found a new player. Mother said, "Having two assistants, why do you need me again!" "Hey, if not for you, who would explain things to them! Rescue me, merciful lady! What a great mechanical brain you have! You should have been an engineer!" "Enough, that will do." Mother coming to our gathering brought great joy to Pinka and Push! Pinka tried to jump on Mother's neck two or three times. Push slowly came and sat bundled up in Mother's lap. Sitting there, he started making a *ghur-ghur* sound from his throat. Once he gets Mother's lap, Push needs nothing else. Pinka, on the other hand, had a strong objection to exactly that. Pinka thinks Mother is his alone. Consequently, he lost his mind. Making a low growling sound. Nudging Mother with his wet nose. Trying to scoop Push out of her lap with his front paws. Trying to grab him by the scruff of his neck to pull him down. When he couldn't do anything, he started whining. A mini-revolution broke out. Mother said, "What a nuisance! Can anything be done like this!" Father said, "Say what you will, I could live a thousand years just to watch this scene." And right at that moment, Pinka jumped onto Mother's lap right on top of Push with a *halum*. Mother said, "So be it. No need to do anything else." "Wait, we two will give you protection. Buro, I'll hold Pinka. You pick up Push." Mother fitted the globe in exactly five minutes and walked away like a hero. Father said, "You have no comparison. You are your own comparison."

The globe in the middle, me on one side, Father on the other, Pinka over there, Push over here. We were sitting in a circle. Pinka and Push were like students too. Looking at the beautiful thing in amazement. Looking at Pinka's nose, I could tell he was breathing in and out heavily. Trying to understand the matter with his nose. Push is watching what Pinka-dada does! Depending on that, he will decide what he should do. Father laughed a *haha* laugh and said, "The world is now in the palm of my hand, Buro-kumar." "What will you do now, Father?" "At midnight, my ship will sail. I am the Captain, you are my mate. Pinka and Push are our passengers. I will become Vasco da Gama." "And Mother?" "Mother will be Madame Gama. Your name will be Antonio Fernandez. Look here, our ship will leave from Lisbon, via Madeira Island, Canary Islands, to the Spanish Sahara, this Villa Cisneros, we will dock the ship at this port. You will wake up in the morning and see sand and only sand. On one side the blue waters of the Atlantic roaring, on the other the calm waves of sand of the Sahara. You will see camels walking with their heads raised. Bells tied around their necks. When the sun comes up, you won't be able to look. Your eyes will be dazzled. Don't forget to take sunglasses." "It will be very hot, Father. Let's not land in the Sahara, let's go land on the Ivory Coast instead. The name is very beautiful." "Is the name Sahara bad? It's even in poetry, 'The wailing of the Sahara in my heart.' Then we will go to the 'Skeleton Coast'. A dangerous place. Do you know why it got such a name? No ship can dock there. Day and night just a fierce wind blowing. Diamonds are scattered and entangled with the sand on the beach. As soon as this news spread in the civilized world, bands of daring sailors set sail in ships on the violently churning, terrifying ocean. Waves like mountains crashing on the shore with a terrible roar. Winds rushing at a hundred, hundred and fifty, two hundred miles an hour. Grains of sand like arrowheads flying in flocks from the bows of invisible warriors. Guards of the diamonds. You know, greed leads to sin, sin leads to death. Leaving the mid-ocean, the ship is coming towards the shore. The Captain stands on the deck and shouts, 'On the larboard, two degrees East.' The helmsman is slowly trying to steer towards land." "What does larboard mean, Father?" "The left side of the ship is called larboard. The

right side is called starboard. The ship is coming towards the shore. Can you imagine, what a strange place! The desert has come to bathe in the sea. And nature has turned on the fan!"

The matter didn't seem to be to Pinka's liking. He barked *vhuk* twice. Push looked at Pinka-dada's face in surprise. And Mother called out loudly from the other room, "Everything has gotten cold. Eat first, then do all the starboard and larboard you want." Father said, "Come everyone, walk in a line. The dinner bell has rung." Pinka understands everything. He got up immediately. Giving Push a nudge with his nose as he got up. We are all going to eat. Pinka in front. Behind him Push, then me. Last of all, Father. The line is heading towards the dining room. Pinka knows where his food is served! Roti and meat. He looked at Push and growled a *go-go* sound twice. Having done that, he lowered his head and started eating. Rice and fish in Push's bowl. Mother had kept everything ready. Push has a somewhat gluttonous nature. He just has to leave his own and peek at Pinka's food. Pinka, of course, gives him some 'prasad' every day. The two are great friends, after all!

Father said, "The greatest food in the world is luchi, fried eggplant, and an occasional bite of raw green chili." Piercing a puffed luchi with his finger, the hot air escaped with a *fush* sound. Mother finds it very funny! I have asked so many people, how did the air get in! No one has been able to explain it properly! Father said, "Three thousand miles this way, three thousand miles that way." "What, Father? Where, Father?" "The Sahara Desert. From the Atlantic to the Red Sea. Waves and waves of sand. The stormy wind blowing over the golden sand has left trails like millions of snakes playing. Whichever way you look, sand and only sand. Mountains of sand. Long ago, there was a volcano. Terrifying. Suddenly one day it got very angry and started throwing balls of fire towards the sky. Streams of lava began to flow down. Where there once was a village, a city, a river flowing gently, everything got buried under the lava. One day the volcano's anger subsided after destroying everything. The lava solidified into stone. Mountains of bizarre shapes were formed. Many places got covered in transparent pebbles like pearls. Not a tree anywhere, no life, no water, the wings of the sun quiver all day over the cursed land. A coppery sky is inverted overhead. As hot in the day, so cold at night. A ghostly moon rises. In some places, there are venomous, stone-colored scorpions."

Both my eating and Father's eating had stopped. Mother came to serve luchis and asked, "Where are you two right now?" Father said, "In the Sahara Desert." "Please return to your plates. Everything has cooled down and become like water." "We are talking while eating." "I can see that. The talking is happening, the eating is not. Out of four luchis, three and a half are lying there." Father looked at me and said, "What are you doing Buro, move your hands quickly. Our ship will weigh anchor at twelve midnight. Look there, Pinka and Push have finished eating. Lying there licking themselves." Mother said, "I'm having you weigh anchor at twelve, but not awake, in your dreams. It will strike exactly eleven and I will turn off all the lights. The electric bill is coming to two-three hundred rupees every month."

After eating, Father said, "Come, let's go to the roof. Sitting under the sky at night brings many things floating in." "What comes, Father?" "Voices might come. Feelings might come. Scenes might come. If you stare unblinkingly at the western sky for a long time, you will see white temples, trees, rivers floating up. Suddenly you will see a ball of fire shooting from north to west. As the night deepens, you will hear the ringing of gongs and bells for *arati*

from some distant temple. Look, I'm telling you, I'm getting goosebumps! Aren't you feeling anything?" "I'm feeling a bit scared. Giving me the creeps." "Nonsense! Aren't you my son! My father's grandson, why would you be scared? Know the unknown. Face the immense. The whole world will be your home. I will send you to Oxford to study. Being scared won't do!"

My mother keeps the roof so beautifully. Sparkling clean. Rows of flower pots all around. Some creeping flower plants, Aparajita, Jasmine, have crept up along a net of ropes. The sweet smell of jasmine floats in the air. In a massive pot is a Kath-champa tree; the very manner of its growth is as if it is dancing with a hundred arms outstretched. In the middle of this, spreading a mat, Father and I sat side by side. "Your mother's garden is becoming quite lovely, Buro!" "Grandmother told Mother before she left, 'I have started it, you finish it.'" "Here, understand Buro, there is no beginning and no end. This is a very funny place, a person arrives, that's their beginning; when that person leaves, that's their end. This is the matter, understand! Without beginning, without end (Anadi ananta). Joined together to make *Anadyananta*. Here, lie flat on your back. Look at the sky, Buro, look well. The sky is our shelter. Because it is above our heads, busy people forget to look at it. Everyone is searching for grain on the ground like chickens. I'm speaking quite good Bengali, Buro!"

Father and I lay side by side. Lying down and looking at the sky makes the mind feel somewhat strange. No house, no room, no path, no people. In places, clusters of stars, as if they have sat down to play the *shehnai*. "Father, nothing can be heard!" "You will, you will, everything will be heard. Let the neighborhood quiet down completely first. Can't you hear! A song is still playing in someone's house, a baby is crying *cha-cha* somewhere. When everything becomes completely quiet, what will you hear first, guess?" "What, Father?" "You will hear a sound exactly like the sound made when you submerge a pitcher in water." "Why, Father?" "Will you understand that? Are you at that age? A human being is a pitcher. The Great Time (Mahakal) submerges that pitcher in the ocean of time and sends it to earth. Pouring little by little, one day a person empties it all. Then God breaks that empty pitcher. What fun Buro! When I don't think, it's as if I become someone else! I think I'll spend a little less. Who am I! Have you seen your mother tie a water-pot over the Tulsi plant in the month of Baishakh! A tiny hole at the bottom of the earthen pot. Mother pours water in it. Drops keep falling, keep falling. If the pot with the hole thinks, I will hold the water, it cannot. It doesn't have that freedom. When sending us, God made six holes. The six senses, anger, greed, illusion, all these things. Everything is spurting out through those holes. Do you know?" "What, Father?" "Apparently Trailanga Swami lived for many, many years?" "Three hundred years!" "Maybe! How, tell me! God gave a machine in our bodies, a pair of lungs. The moment you take a breath, some oxygen enters. Without oxygen, an animal dies, yet this same oxygen burns the inside. You know, when humans were wise, they measured lifespan not by years, but by breaths. So the yogis learned Pranayama. Pranayama is the technique of reducing breathing at will. The fewer breaths you take, the longer you will live. Yogis can take one breath and stay for a long time. Staying like this is called *Kumbhaka*. We can't do that. We heave sighs haphazardly. We sigh more when we are angry. We have no control over ourselves. Our days fall drop by drop and become years. From years to eras. One day all the capital is exhausted." "Father, will you teach me Kumbhaka?" "Would I be able to teach you! I don't have that power, son. But I can take you to such a yogi, who becomes light and floats up in the air while doing Pranayama. Floating flat on his back like a corpse on the river water, he can go as far as he wants." "When will you take me, Father?"

"Wait, let me find out when he comes to Kolkata! He wanders from pilgrimage to pilgrimage all year round."

I have taken the rope out of my shirt pocket. I must go to Bishu-da tomorrow itself. Tonight I will tear this rope, no matter what. Even if my hands get shredded to pieces. Father is lying flat on his back looking at the gathering of stars, and I, in my own mind, twisted the two ends of the rope around my hands and pulled with all my might. It hurts terribly. Father said to take the mind away from the pain, I am trying to do just that. I didn't notice when Mother came and stood in front of me. I was startled when Mother said, "That rope again!" Father said, "What's this about a rope you're saying since earlier! What's the matter!" "Hear it from the mouth of your meritorious son. Ah, how beautiful the roof is!" Mother went to the edge of the parapet. I told Father everything. Father sat up immediately. Bishu-da's homework caught Father's fancy. "Give me the rope, let me see if I can tear it." "If you tear it, it won't count, Father. I have to tear it. It's my test." "You can just learn Pranayama from Bishu. Fantastic boy. Can change the very course of your life. Here, pull. Pull as hard as you can. Hold your breath and pull. Pull. Harder, harder."

Mother had completed one round of the roof and sat down in front of me. I am pulling. Father is encouraging me, "Pull, pull. Harder." Despite doing so much, it didn't happen. I lost once again. Hands are burning. A drop of sweat fell from my forehead onto my hand. I am feeling very angry. Just like when you fail an exam, my inside feels exactly like that. Father said, "Go, take a walk around the whole roof. Go to that Tulsi plant pot and say, Narayana, give me strength." I took one round of the whole roof. Stood for a while in front of the Tulsi pot. Silently said, "Narayana, if you truly reside in the Tulsi, give me strength." Mother said, "Come here, crazy boy." I saw Mother examining the rope carefully. Although it was dark, everything was somewhat visible. There is a light in the night sky too. Mother hadn't seen Bishu-da's rope before. I sat close to Mother. Sitting near Mother feels so good. The mind becomes somewhat different. I am feeling a little sleepy. I feel like burying my head in Mother's lap and falling asleep for tonight. Mother said, "Let me see, how are you holding the rope?" I held it with both hands, the way I had held it before. Leaning forward, Mother brought it close to her eyes and looked. Looking at it she said, "Listen Buro, even in applying force there is a math. Remember the Sanskrit verse? *He who has intellect has strength, where is the strength of the intellect-less!* If you hold the two ends from so close, no matter how much you try, you will never be able to tear it. Move your hands. Hold it further towards the ends. Increase the length. Yes. Now say 'Jai Ma' and pull. Not sitting down. Stand up, with your legs apart. Puff out your chest. Yes, now pull."

Before pulling I asked, "Mother, will it work?" "It absolutely has to. Don't just pull, think in your mind that it is already torn. It's already broken. Connect your mind with the strength." I moved towards the parapet. Closing my eyes, I held Mother in front of my mind. I do the same when I sit for exams, no question feels difficult then. With Mother beside me, I can even climb Everest. I remembered my Grandmother. I looked back. Father and Mother were sitting like a picture. Mother said, "Pull." I am pulling. Hard, even harder. Thinking in my mind, this is already torn. I have kept my eyes closed. I am pulling, and I can see in my mind, little by little the twist of the rope is loosening. Shredding. A final pull holding my breath. A *snap* sound, both hands shot outwards. Two pieces of rope in two hands. I ran and dove into Mother's lap. Mother's hand ruffling my hair. The tinkling of bangles in my ear.

‖ ৪ ‖ (Part IV)

Bishu-da said, "You did it? How did you do it?" "By Mother's blessing." "You don't say? So you recognized your Mother? Remember this your whole life." "Father was there too. Father on one side, Mother on one side, me in the middle. Father said, you have to do it. And Mother said, there is a math in everything in life. She taught me that math." Bishu-da jumped with joy, "Oh, tell me, tell me that exact thing." "Mother said, no matter how hard you pull, you have to maintain a distance. If you hold it from very close and pull, it will never tear. Mother taught me the technique, and the rope tore immediately." "My respects to your Mother, a hundred million respects. Alright then, less talk, more work. You see a water tank in the distance?" "Yes, sir." "Go, run and take a dive. Leave your shirt and vest hanging on that hook. Run and jump in with a splash."

Quite fun. I ran and with one leap fell into the water of the tank. As soon as I fell, I felt like my breath would stop. Ice-cold water. Shook me to the bone. I tried to quickly get up. By then Bishu-da was standing beside it. "Uh-uh, you can't get up. Endure it. You must stay for at least five minutes. Bring strength to your mind." I somehow stayed submerged in the water for five minutes. Ears throbbing. The inside of my body was shivering. The moment I got out of the tank, ah, what relief. My whole body felt invigorated. Bishu-da handed me a clean towel. I wiped myself dry. "Shall I put on my shirt and vest now, Bishu-da?" "No brother, forget about the shirt and vest for now. Go into that small room. Once you enter, I will close the door. What, are you scared?" "A little bit." "Nothing to fear. Go."

As soon as I entered the room, Bishu-da closed the door. The room has no windows anywhere. All white walls. Two ventilators high up. One on this wall, one on that wall. As soon as the door closed, my heart skipped a beat. About a dozen red lights turned on here and there with a *pop-pop* sound. The room's temperature increased. In the middle, a stool. Instructions lit up in red letters. Sit straight on the stool. The heat is increasing. Gradually increasing. I am sweating profusely. My whole body is burning in the heat. Sweat is rolling down. Yet I am enduring it. Sitting quietly. Much later, all the red lights turned off one by one. A white light turned on. But the door didn't open. The heat decreased slowly just as it had increased. Then at one point, the door opened. I came out at Bishu-da's call. My body felt light as a feather.

Bishu-da said, "I will hold you for twenty more minutes, then we are done for today." He took me to a pillar and made me stand straight. Pillar behind me, I am in front. In front of me, in the distance, a white wall. A picture frame on the wall. No picture in the frame. Bishu-da said, "Join your legs and stand perfectly straight, taut. Now look straight. What do you see?" "A picture frame. No picture." "There is. In your mind. You will not move or fidget even a little bit. You have to stand looking straight at that frame for ten minutes. Try not to blink. At first, your eyes will burn. Water will come to your eyes. Let it come. And try to see your mother in that frame. Mother is wearing a red-bordered silk sari, sitting with her hair loose, in meditation. Ready, start. One, two, three, four..."

Bishu-da moved away. At first, my mind was very restless for a few minutes. I wanted to turn my neck and look around. Wanted to move my hands. My mind wanted to walk around. Mother's picture was coming and going in the white frame. Finally, my whole mind went to the picture frame. I became stubborn, why can't I hold Mother there! I will. I absolutely must. As soon as I increased my mental strength, I saw Mother had come and sat still in my canvas. Afraid that if I move, Mother will move, so I am still. Afraid that if I blink, Mother will slide away, so my unblinking eyes are still. Towards the end, I found it immensely fun. Being still felt like a great task in itself. In no time, ten minutes passed. Staring unblinkingly in one way, water had come out of my eyes. Rolled down both cheeks. Not falling anymore. I am seeing everything brighter than before now. Bishu-da came forward. Placing a hand on my back he said, "Very good." I asked, "Now?" "Tell me how you feel?" "Very good." "Wow, fine. Now you have to stand on one leg. Right leg for five minutes. Left leg for five minutes. Can you do it?" "Very much." "This time keep your eyes closed, and continuously say 'Mother' in your mind. Every time you say Mother, imagine a light flashing before your eyes. Flash, flash, flash. Okay? Five on this leg. Five on that. Once five minutes are up on one leg, I will clap. Ready, start."

This time it felt quite difficult. Standing still on one leg! I felt like I would topple over. But while saying Mother-Mother, my mind went there. Every time I say Mother, a light flashes before my eyes. Great fun. Finally, Bishu-da said, "Holiday for today. Here, I have made a notebook for you. Look, written on the cover of the notebook is 'Resolution' (Sankalpa). On the first page, take this pen. First draw a Swastika symbol. Not there, at the beginning of the page, in the middle. Yes. Fine. Now write. I will speak the truth, I will know the truth, I will love the truth. I am truth. Done? Now write, honest (Sat). My thoughts are honest, my actions are honest, my company is honest, I am existence, consciousness, bliss (Sat-Chit-Ananda). Write, pure. My body is a pure temple. Yes. In that pure temple, the pure mind is my God. Write, intellect is the altar. Thought is the flower. Action is the worship. After this write: Eternal, Pure, Awakened, Free (Nitya, Shuddha, Buddha, Mukta)." Bishu-da placed a hand on my head, "Go, from today bring a rhythm to your walking. Beat, tempo, rhythm. Like left, right, left, right, similarly Nitya, Shuddha, Buddha, Mukta. Walk and say, Nitya, Shuddha, Buddha, Mukta. Right-left, right-left."

I bowed to Bishu-da. Walking along the road, at first my steps fell randomly. Within a short while, the rhythm came. The four words seemed to etch themselves into my mind, Nitya, Shuddha, Buddha, Mukta. I had no other awareness. Just walking and walking. It was like I was intoxicated. Bishu-da gave me a wonderful thing. My body is feeling vibrant. Mother said, "How did you come? You look very radiant." "The thing I have received, Mother! Wait, let me bow down to you properly." "Suddenly?" "Don't say that Mother. I bow to you twice every day. Now I will do it a little more; tell me why? You have come inside me." "Your crazy talk, I don't understand it all." My mother's feet are so beautiful! Pure white. Slender. As if they blend with the earth. Mother said, "Come, let me feed you thick milk. Then I will enter the kitchen."

In Grandmother's room, that thick rug is spread on the floor. The one Grandmother used to sit on to teach me. That polished low table for sitting and writing. Incense is burning in front of Grandmother's picture. On a small dish, a sandesh, a glass of water. Flower petals floating in the water. This room of ours is so beautiful! Mother said, "Now, fold your hands and pray, *Victory, Victory, O Goddess, essence of the moving and non-moving world...*"

While teaching me, Mother said at one point, "You know Buro, a molar tooth has been throbbing terribly since this afternoon. It's aching sharply from time to time." "Shall I fetch medicine, Mother?" "There is only one medicine for a toothache, extract it, uproot it completely. I will wait a day or two more, then have it uprooted. You study by yourself now, I will go look after the cooking."

A car came and stopped in front of the house. I quickly got up and peeked out the window. A monk got out of the car. A thick staff in one hand. A kamandalu (water pot) in the other. A saffron bag hanging from his shoulder. A folded blanket. A fair, tall appearance. Gold-rimmed glasses on his eyes. High sharp nose. Who is this! I ran and told Mother. Before Mother could advance towards the door, the bell rang. Mother couldn't recognize him at first. The monk was smiling a thin smile. The large eyes were so beautiful. A sweet voice, "You don't recognize me?" Just as she was about to say no, Mother suddenly recognized him, "Chandan-da! You? You remembered after all these days?" The monk said, "I will eat puffed rice, I will eat coconut, I will eat cucumber. And what I never eat, I will eat that too in a steel glass. Good tea."

The monk spread his blanket on the rug. Placed the shoulder bag to one side. Laid down the staff. Beside it the kamandalu. Then he went to Grandmother's bookshelf, pulled out a book, and started reading it standing right there. He is reading. Just keeps reading. He completely immersed himself in it. Does this happen too! No conversation with anyone. No awareness. I thought to myself, I also have to become like this. I don't even have the courage to say anything. Instead of standing in one way like that, one could sit somewhere and read the book too. Of course, I also practiced standing still for a long time today at Bishu-da's gym. Still, I couldn't hold myself back, I picked up a chair, placed it gently behind him and said, "Please sit." The monk was startled. Keeping a finger at the place he was reading to fold the book, he looked at me. Truly, what beautiful eyes! What a beautiful smile! He told me, "What beautiful training you have. Wow, wow! You couldn't recognize me! I am your grandmother's friend. Seven years ago, I had sung a song for your grandmother. She loved me very much. Her last written letter is in my bag, it travels the whole world with me. I have seen very few people like your grandmother." The monk sat on the chair. Opened the book and started reading again. Sank into the pages of the book in an instant. Mother brought puffed rice, cucumber, coconut. The monk said, "You sprinkle some Ganges water and place it there, I will offer it and then eat." I immediately wiped the floor of the room. I spread Mother's prayer mat for him. Mother said, "Come, let's go outside. Pull the door to. Chandan-da, call us when you are done." Coming outside, I whispered, "Mother, the Monk Maharaj looks so beautiful, can't I become like him?" "Why can't you? Knowledge, honest thoughts, spiritual practice, good company. This is the path to becoming beautiful. Do you know, there are very few scholars like him. He knows ten or twelve languages including English, Bengali, Sanskrit. He paints extraordinarily well. He sings wonderfully. What a life, you know! Today in India, tomorrow in England. Travels the world. Gives lectures at major universities." "What should I call him?" "Call him Kaku (Uncle)."

After a while, the room's door opened. Kaku, Monk-kaku came out. Mined with us with great enthusiasm. Father had also arrived. Hearing Father's voice, Pinka and Push had also started dancing. I saw Father addressing Monk-kaku with 'apni' (formal you). I understood a wise monk has no age, only respect. Grandmother used to use 'apni' too. Monk-kaku kicked Mother out of the kitchen. He will cook himself. During his stay in England, he got a diploma

in cooking from Paris. How much a single person can learn! I stand to one side in amazement watching the antics of Father and Monk-kaku. Looking at Mother's face, it seems she is suffering terribly from the toothache. In a spare moment, I slipped out and bought a tablet from the pharmacy. Monk-kaku cooked khichuri. Delicious. I keep eating. I just keep eating. There seems to be no end to the eating. Father said, "Watch it Buro, lest your stomach bursts?" Monk-kaku said, "The stomach never bursts. The stomach is a bladder. Elastic. Tell me, how was the cooking?" "Impossibly good. Beyond compare." "Before leaving I will teach you three or four recipes. A person should learn everything. There is no end to education."

We went to the roof and sat on the mat. With Monk-kaku's arrival, the atmosphere of the house has become completely different. I just keep feeling how empty the house will become after Monk-kaku leaves! It would be great if he took me with him! Father said, "When you come, it feels like a touch of fire. This life is ruined. From the next time, I have to be careful from the very beginning. No family life or anything. I will make my life like yours." Monk-kaku smiled. Said, "All lives are good, if the goal is kept right. Do not despair over life. Why is your life bad? Raise your son. That is your dream." "It's very good that you came. Could you teach him a little simple Pranayama?" "He needs to be taught singing. Singing is Pranayama. Is the harmonium not played occasionally, just lying there?" "Hasn't been played in a long time." Monk-kaku said to me, "I will wake you up at dawn tomorrow. You will sit with me with the harmonium. If you can start the morning with a melody, there will be no possibility of going out of tune."

Mother came and sat on one side. Holding her cheek with her sari pallu. "What Mother, didn't you take the tablet?" "I took it." "So it's not reducing?" Father and Monk-kaku both asked together, "What happened?" As soon as they heard it was a tooth, Kaku said, "Do you have cloves?" Mother said, "Yes." "Come, let's go downstairs, I will cure it right now." Seven or eight cloves were crushed on the grinding stone. Then that paste was applied to the base of Mother's tooth. Father secretly asked me, "Since when has this been happening?" "I think since that evening." "This has never happened before!" Father seemed very worried. If anything happens to any of us, Father acts as if it has happened to him. Kaku said, "Don't worry, it will subside in half an hour. But it won't be cured. We have to go to a dentist tomorrow. Toothache means extraction. An empty cowshed is better than a mischievous cow."

Mother was making a bed for Monk-kaku on the floor of Grandmother's room by spreading a blanket, Kaku came and removed it. He said, "What need does a monk have for a bed! A monk's bed is his *asan* (sitting mat). The whole night will be spent sitting anyway. If necessary, I will roll over on the mat itself. Boudi, if you can sleep, lie down, otherwise read a book, an absorbing book, you will forget the toothache. Okay wait, I have a projector and slides, we can have a pilgrimage sitting in the room for an hour."

Kaku projected the light onto the pure white wall of the large room. He adjusted the focus by turning the lens. Then picture after picture fell on the wall. Haridwar, Kumbh Mela. Resting my head on Mother's chest, half-lying, I am watching comfortably. Mother's fingers are running through my hair, tickling me. I am whispering, "Has the pain reduced, Mother?" Mother says, "I don't even remember it anymore." Monks bathing at Har ki Pauri in the Kumbh Mela. Rishikesh. Lakshman Jhula. Gita Bhavan. Devprayag. Rudraprayag.

Badrinath. Kedarnath. Where is Monk-kaku taking us from where! Suddenly a few drops of water fell on my forehead, cheek, nose. "Mother, are you crying?" Mother said in a choked voice, "We traveled to all these places with your father in such joy, Buro. Remembering those days makes my heart ache." "With Grandmother, Mother?" "Yes." "And me? Where was I then?" "You hadn't become Buro yet."

Monk-kaku has now moved to Gaumukh. Ah, what a scene. Mother said, "God lives in all these places. This is heaven." Father says to Kaku, "Let's go, Maharaj, let's tour the Himalayas once this Puja." "Let's go, what is it to me? You are the ones with many obstacles." "There is only one obstacle, our dog and cat. We'll return and see both have died." Father is absolutely right, I hadn't thought of that. Where will Pinka and Push stay? No, we won't be going anywhere anymore. A little distance away on the cold floor, Pinka is sleeping soundly, spread-eagled. Fur fluttering gently in the fan's breeze. Right tucked near him is little Push. The scene of the Himalayas is good, but this scene is also good. We all went to sleep. The light is on in Monk-kaku's room. What an astonishing person! No fixed schedule for sleep. No rules for eating, yet it's as if a divine light emanates from his appearance. I woke up once late at night, and I saw the light was still on in Kaku's room. Singing in a very low, wonderful melody. I came back and quickly fell asleep.

I woke up at dawn to Kaku's song. He had already bathed. His saffron cloth and shawl were hanging on the line. The smell of incense. And another astonishing thing, sitting up all night he had drawn a massive portrait of Grandmother. He kept it upright on the table, looking absolutely alive. The photo that was on the bed is much smaller. What Kaku drew from the photo is much larger. How does he draw such beautiful pictures! Yesterday he told me, intention is everything. Because they had the intention, humans went to the moon. Built the atom bomb. Intended to be birds, hence airplanes. Intended to float on the ocean, hence ships. I had asked, "Can a person become tall or short if they intend to?" "Perhaps they can. Read the Kathamrita and see, when Thakur was practicing in the mood of Hanuman, his spine grew by two or three inches during that time. You need the strength of intention. Thakur used to say, yearning (Vyakulata). His analogies had no comparison. When someone loses their job, what do they do? They run from office to office like a madman, and ask everyone individually, brother, is there any post vacant? A person thrashes about in yearning. Twirling a mustache, crossing legs, sitting like a babu, chewing paan, without a care in the world, that won't do. I want, therefore I get. That is the point."

Maharaj rolled up the picture and said, "Come on, a morning walk and getting the picture framed, let's get both jobs done together." I asked Mother, "What is your tooth saying, Mother?" "It says, extraction. Go, take a walk with Chandan-da. You've been worrying terribly about my tooth since yesterday evening. What's there to worry about so much, you crazy boy. If it feels like it, I'll go with your father and have it extracted. A fifteen-minute affair. Grab and pull out. Go, take a walk."

Chandan-Maharaj surely walks! He is walking furiously fast. The two ends of his saffron shawl are fluttering. I keep falling behind. Every now and then I have to run a little to catch up. Then I fall behind again. Does it work like this? Finally, I just blurted out, "Kaku, I can't keep up with you." Kaku stopped. The park was right next to us. The park's half-broken railing. A Krishnachura tree spreading its massive branches upwards towards the sky in an arrogant posture. Kaku said, "What can't you keep up with?" "I can't keep up with your

walking. You walk terribly fast." Chandan-Maharaj laughed and said, "Do I walk fast, or do you walk slowly?" I fell into thought trying to answer Maharaj's question. Really, what would the answer be! Which one is correct? My walking slowly, or Maharaj's walking fast? Which is right? What is the answer? "What are you thinking? Answer." "I can't exactly understand what the answer should be." "Why, you told me I am walking fast. I am telling you, you are walking slowly. Which one is right?" "I don't know, Maharaj." "Listen, here the subjects of judgment are three: speed, you, and me. If you and I step out, what is left?" "Speed is left." "What is associated with speed?" "Time." "Wow, you said it right. And what else is associated?" "Distance." "Excellent. Then let's rearrange it again. Object, distance, and time. Right?" "Yes, sir." "Then the comparison is not me with you, but you with yourself. Instead of paying attention to me, pay attention to the path. Keep your head down and walk the path with concentration. The path is running in the opposite direction. The faster you can make the path run, the faster you will run forward. Come, let's sit in this park for a while, it's quite empty now."

There was a patch of grass. A massive Sago palm tree. The rustling sound of leaves in the wind. We sat facing each other under the tree. Maharaj said, "What we did just now, is called minor reasoning. This reasoning is very prevalent in Buddhism. Through reasoning, both intellect and logic become very sharp. Before coming to you, I spent six days in the best Buddhist monastery in Mysore. You know, it was quite an experience! Far, far away from the city, crossing jungles and mountain paths, it's like a marvel. I felt like I had gone back a thousand years. In that Buddhist monastery, two thousand lamas are spending their lives following ancient traditions. There, even a three-year-old child is a lama. Studying day and night. Now listen, every night there is a debate battle there. If you didn't know, you would think they were fighting. The debate happens standing up, slapping thighs, clapping hands. That is the custom. Meaning, there is no way to become drowsy. Starting in the evening, the debate can drag on until midnight. You know, I had an extraordinary experience." "What kind, Kaku?" "First of all, I didn't know that such a monastery existed in India. Then that devotion, that thirst for knowledge! One day I saw the younger lamas entered the debate arena. Want to hear what kind of debate it is? Those who entered the arena were aged seven to nine. One says, 'Tell me what is meant by a pitcher?' 'That which contains the common properties of all pitchers.' 'Hey, first you have to recognize a pitcher, only then will you know the common properties of all pitchers.' 'Okay, that which can be used to fetch water.' 'Oh, then a bucket is also a pitcher.' 'No, no, it has to be round.' 'Oh, then a football is also round, is that a pitcher too.' 'No, you have to be able to fetch water with it.' 'What if it has a hole?' 'Then it is a pitcher with a hole.' 'What if all the water leaks out of it?' 'If it has a big hole, then it's a part of a pitcher, not a pitcher.' It continued like this for hours. A thing to listen to, a thing to contemplate. My life is fulfilled. Have you seen the idol of Manjushri Buddha! Buddha sitting within a halo of light. Half-closed, long, wavy meditative eyes. In his right hand, a sharp sword, both edges of which are honed and keen. One side cuts through darkness, the other side cuts through the web of false reasoning."

Monk-kaku looked absently at the blue sky. Suddenly turning to me, he said, "Father was talking about teaching Pranayama, do you know what Pranayama is?" "No, sir." "Control of Prana (life force). Meaning control or regulation over breathing. Stopping the movement of breath is Pranayama. Our breathing is normally very chaotic. Bringing equilibrium between inhalation and exhalation is simple Pranayama. Come, let me teach you that technique in this open air. Sit. Sit in Padmasana (Lotus pose)." I knew Padmasana. Grandmother had

taught me. Whatever good there is in life, Grandmother taught me whenever she had time. After I sat in Padmasana, Monk-kaku started slapping his knee to keep a beat, one, two, three, four. Four, three, two, one. "Pay attention to the flow of time. It returns in the same rhythm it goes. Say it in your mind." After this went on for quite some time, he said, "Has the beat and tempo settled?" "Yes, sir." "Now match your inhalation and exhalation." Took breath on one, two, three, four. Exhaled on four, three, two, one. After doing this for a while, I felt intoxicated. It felt as if a room that had been messy had become quite organized. After about ten minutes of this, Monk-kaku said, "No more, rest now. You have to drink milk after Pranayama. Let's go home, sitting in Grandmother's room I will teach you the Gayatri mantra." "I know it." "There is still more to know. Every word has to be placed in different parts of the body. You have to rise slowly from the bottom. Finally right at the top of the head. From the head straight to the solar realm."

We went to the banks of the Ganges from the park. There, Chandan-kaku stepped straight into the water. No towel or *gamcha*, no care in the world.

॥৫॥ (Part V)

Father was putting rotted oil-cake fertilizer at the base of the plants in the garden. I stood beside him going, "Ugh, what a smell, ugh what a smell." What bizarre food for plants! That which has such a foul smell at its roots produces fragrant flowers at its top. God's rules and regulations are different. Chandan-Maharaj was sitting in the shade of a tree far away, painting with watercolors. Wearing those strange round glasses. Hanging on the tip of his nose. Pinka is going around watering the trees. As is his nature.

Father asked, "Hey Buro, how does it feel to get a tooth pulled?" Thinking a bit, I said, "I don't think it'll hurt too much. Why, you know, they'll just pull it out!" "Then what will happen? Your mother's tooth has to be extracted. Ah, the poor thing will suffer a lot. Do something, Buro." "What can be done, tell me?" "That's what I am thinking. I asked all the trees. Still haven't got any answer." "There, the moment you mentioned trees, I remembered. Imagine I am a guava tree. Speaking on behalf of the guava tree, I'm saying, if you crush guava leaves and apply the juice to the base of the tooth, it might heal." Father jumped up, "The idea. Shake hands, Buro, shake hands. You have no idea what the condition of my teeth was in my childhood. If you were beside me then, tears would have burst from your eyes. And people didn't fuss over their bodies so much back then. Let alone teeth. People don't die from toothaches. In the end, Moydanob cured me with guava leaves." "Who is Moydanob, Father?" "He carried our household on his shoulders continuously for thirty years. His name was Madhusudan. From that, Moydanob."

The direction Chandan-kaku was sitting and painting in, is where the guava tree is. Grandmother had planted it. Father plucked a handful of guava leaves from that tree. I know what Father will do. He will immediately crush the guava leaves on the grinding stone, then apply that juice to treat Mother before moving on to any other work. Father often says, "If I

were Ravana, you would see the stairway to heaven get finished. Buro, don't leave work pending like me in life. Do it the moment you think of it."

In the afternoon at the exact time, I went to Bishu-da's again. It was terribly hot today. Bishu-da said, "I was looking for exactly this kind of a hot day." "Why, Bishu-da?" "Unless you put the body through extreme hardship, the true mind is not forged. Know this, a body in comfort means an unhappy mind. Life is like *chhana* (curdled milk cheese). Have you seen watery chhana? In the sweet shop?" "Yes, I've seen it." "That chhana has to be put under pressure first. They call it putting it under the press. Do you know what the press is?" "No, Bishu-da." "Wrap it in a cloth and hang it first. All the water, the excess water dripped away. Then place the lump between two wooden boards and apply pressure. First pressure with two hands; then knees, finally feet. A man finally stands on it. All the water gets squeezed out, leaving an almost dry lump of chhana. Then that chhana is thrown into a wok. Stirred and kneaded over a soft flame with a spatula, cooked until it becomes *sandesh*. Then put into molds, palm-core shape, diamond shape, conch shape, pomelo shape. You see, our life is chhana. There is a lot of excess water, it has to be drained through hardship. Over the soft flame of sorrow, with the right amount of the sugar of happiness, kneaded by the spatula of discipline, cooked finer and finer; then the mold of the artisan's hands. Becoming a human being is just like turning chhana into sandesh. Here, get up."

I walked forward with Bishu-da. In the middle of the spotless courtyard, a square brick structure. Plastered. Painted red. Quite large. Somewhat like an altar. Bishu-da said, "This is called the coffin. This end and that end are open. You have to enter through this end and come out through that end." "This is it! This is very easy." "Try it and see. But be careful. Look here, the entrance is round. Enter head first. And remember, once you enter, there is no way out except through the other side, and you have to get out yourself. If you don't come out yourself, no one has the power to pull you out."

What is Bishu-da saying! Is this a big deal! A rectangular concrete box. I'll enter here and exit there, that's it! Bishu-da said, "Here, take off your shirt and everything, just keep your underwear. Here, rub oil all over your body so it shines. The task isn't as easy as you think. There is a puzzle inside. A maze. Stamina is needed. Intelligence is needed. Mental strength is needed. You'll get a target of light, and remember, head first, legs behind. Okay? Wish you the best of luck. And another thing, there is no way back. Always forward. Onward, onward. Forward march. You won't be able to stand. You have to crawl. You are to crawl. Imagine you are a giant snake. Go, get in."

The round hole is close to the ground. Kneeling down, I squeezed my head through and pushed my body inside. My feet hadn't even entered yet when my head hit a wall. I couldn't move straight ahead anymore. The path? Where is the path? Light was coming from quite a bit to the left. Another round hole in the wall close to the floor. Bending the upper part of my body, twisting it to squeeze my head through, I started pulling my body like a snake. I could clearly feel my body had become like the English letter 'S'. The only advantage was the inner walls and floor were very smooth. Having rubbed oil, my body was easily sliding along like a snake. As I pulled my body in, thrusting my head into the second hole, my waist went in, but the lower half got awkwardly stuck. It hurts terribly, but there is nothing to do. Bishu-da has engineered this well. No way to go back. Terrifying geometry. No way to stand or sit. Have to crawl forward on my chest. The bent lower part of my body would only come in when I could

push the upper part into the third compartment. The hole to the third compartment is completely on the right. I understood by looking at the light. Bishu-da's voice floated in, "Cheer up. Don't give up. Don't be defeated. Keep moving forward. No road. No way. You have to get yourself out. This is called the Death Tunnel."

Thinking about it, it was true. There was no other way to get out. Since I entered, I have to get myself out. Pushing against the wall to turn from left to right, I drove my head into the third hole. Pulling my body, pulling it inside. Because I was sweating from the heat, I could slide easily. When twisting from left to right, right to left, it felt like all my bones would break. Within a short while, I became intoxicated by the challenge. Six holes in total inside, six compartments. It took me half an hour to get out. As soon as I came out, Bishu-da put a thick garland of jasmine flowers around my neck. All the boys of Bishu-da's gym were standing in a line wearing white uniforms. They clapped. Bishu-da patted my back and said, "Fantastic. No one has been able to get out of the 'Death Tunnel' in such a short time. Go to the water tank. Take a bath. Then there will be a ceremony for you."

As soon as I came back from bathing, Bishu-da gave me a packet, "Go, wear this and come." Inside the packet was a beautiful loose outfit. Loose, three-quarter pajama pants, a loose-sleeved, open-chested jacket. Tied at the waist with a belt. Putting on the outfit and standing in front of the gym mirror, I myself was enchanted seeing myself. As soon as I came out of the dressing room, Bishu-da said, "Go, sit on that altar." The other boys are sitting around the altar. Behind it, a bushy Bakul tree. Bishu-da has also put on an outfit like mine. How beautiful he looks! Six feet tall. Glowing fair skin. A head full of curly hair. High nose. Long eyes. Eyebrows like two pitch-black bows drawn by a brush. A boy held a tray in front of Bishu-da. Some flowers, paddy, durva grass. A yellow thread. Bishu-da first tied the yellow thread on my right upper arm. Immediately a conch shell blew. He blessed me by placing flowers, paddy, and durva on my head. I immediately stepped down from the altar and bowed. Bishu-da said, "From today you became a member of the Fearless Order. Your dharma will be to stand up against injustice. To stand beside the oppressed. To protect the weak from the hands of the strong. To excel in all endeavors. You will speak the truth. You will behave honestly. You will respect elders. You will abandon laziness. Honest action will be your dharma." "What will I give you?" "You will give me devotion. And give one drop of blood. Here, take this."

Bishu-da gave me something like a thick needle. Took me to an inner room. The prayer room. A beautiful carpet on the floor. An altar. Mother Kali on the altar. A massive tanpura on the carpet. Next to Mother Kali's altar, a 'gong' hangs in a wooden frame. Below it, the hammer to strike it. Bishu-da said, "Sit perfectly still with your eyes closed. And imagine in your mind, your body is a body of light." I had never thought like this before. While thinking, it truly felt like I had acquired a body of light. My inside felt incredibly bright. After that, I pricked my finger with the needle, took a drop of blood, and pressed it like a *bindi* (mark) onto a piece of jute cloth framed in wood. There were at least fifty other such marks on that cloth. Taking the canvas, Bishu-da placed it upright at the Mother's feet. He said, "This is the canvas of strength, the canvas of resolution. From today you are one of our order."

On my way back home, I saw Shyamol and his gang chatting sitting on the raised platform (*rock*). Someone among them saw me and whistled three times going *sik-sik*. Then someone struck up a tune, "Who goes there! The scrawny son of a crazy father goes there. Who goes

there! A fake ascetic goes there." My pace was slowing down. My body was burning with rage. If anyone says anything about my father, I feel like murdering them. I have been going to Bishu-da's for only three days. The body might not have changed in three days, but the mind has changed. Just a while ago, the 'Death Tunnel' sent waves of energy through my body. I have seen Bishu-da's disciples fight. Just watching them felt like I had learned a lot. I felt like swooping down on that garbage with the sharp screech of a kite. Then moving hands and legs simultaneously with lightning speed. Knocking out every single tooth of all of them. Bishu-da said, "The predatory shriek of a kite's dive, the flapping of a rooster's wings, the kick of a horse, and the valor of a lion combined into one is what you must master." And he said, "Do not do anything anywhere without my permission."

Walking with my head held high just as I was, I reached the intersection of Bindhyabasinitola. They were frying hot jalebis at Shukur's shop. Any other time, I would have been tempted. Not today. Bishu-da said, "No matter how tempting the thing is, do not eat anytime and every time. There will be a time for eating. And tempting things, even if you desire them, still do not eat them. Learn to conquer yourself. Not conquering the world, but conquering yourself. Emperor Alexander. When you feel you can't do it with your own strength, close your eyes and imagine you are Narayana; the Sudarshana Chakra in one hand, the conch in the other. Think you are immense." Bishu-da said a beautiful English sentence, I have memorized it. Where Bishu-da sits on his mat, the phrase is written beautifully on the wall behind him: *our life is what our thoughts make it*. As one's thoughts are, so will their life be.

Tapan is sitting by himself on the platform of the Kucheys' house. Looking at the boy makes me very sad. He just stares blankly with large eyes. Fair, handsome. A head full of pitch-black curly hair. Can't speak properly. Stutters. Cannot pronounce 'T'. When Tapan's father and mother meet someone, after a few words they say, 'You all are so beautiful! I have only one son. Look at God's curse! Who will feed him and clothe him his whole life? Who will look after him?' I went and sat beside Tapan. No one mixes with me! Seeing me, his face broke into a smile. Slurring his words he said, "Bari (Bari/Buro). Why are you alone here?" "I am a giant. How many words do you know?" He put his hand in his pocket and pulled something out. Three or four paper-wrapped lozenges. Holding them out in front he said, "Taw, taw! (Take, take!)" Exactly like a large-sized child. As soon as I picked one lozenge, he shook his head and said, "Tar, tar. Tar for you (All, all for you)." I was very thirsty for a long time. I unwrapped a lozenge given by Tapan and put it in my mouth. Quite good. Tapan is smiling to himself. He is like that. Sometimes smiles. Sometimes rocks. Sometimes tries to hum songs to himself. I am staring at Tapan's face in amazement. Trying to understand, what is the difference between that mind and my mind! What is happening in Tapan's mind right at this moment! What is he thinking, why is he smiling!

Turning my neck towards the intersection, I see Shyamol and two other boys coming. At first, I thought I'd get up, walk fast, and slip away. Then I remembered, Bishu-da said, do not be afraid. I remained seated. Shyamol and the two boys came face to face with the platform and stopped abruptly. Looking at Tapan. I became tense. Trying to guess what they might do to Tapan! I have seen before, given the chance, they torture Tapan in various ways. Suddenly, all three jumped on Tapan's neck like leopards. Helpless Tapan. Two of them pinned him down. Shyamol was trying to take off his shirt and pants. I couldn't stay quiet anymore. I shouted, "Shyamol, careful!" Shyamol looked out of the corner of his eye. In a

very contemptuous voice, he said, "Scram, you scrawny rat." Then he said to the two boys, "Saroj, pin the bastard down. He's yapping too much." So one boy's name is Saroj. Letting go of Tapan, he is advancing towards me. I see all three faces like hyenas. Turning left, he is coming towards me. I know what he will do. Bishu-da was teaching a boy the other day and saying, 'When many come to attack, think of yourself as a compressed spring. The moment they get close, spring up. At this time, use your head intelligently. Whoever is closest, strike straight at their chin. From below to above. The moment their head tilts back, strike a chop to the front of the throat. Bam, flat.' The boy named Saroj is very close to me. "Bishu-da!" My terrifying shout startled him. All the air necessary exited my lungs. My lungs were completely empty. Instantly, I sprang up like a spring. I lost all sense of direction then. I just felt like the front of my head split open. Saroj, saying 'Ugh', fell back onto the street. A bicycle was passing by on the road at that time. All five fingers of Saroj's right hand got caught in the spokes, took a full spin, broke with a *crack-crack* sound, and got stuck. The cyclist was thrown three feet away.

Bishu-da was teaching a boy the other day and saying, 'God gave us two eyes. During self-defense, do not keep both eyes in the same direction. Keep both eyes in two directions. Rotate them like searchlights.' I was doing exactly that. One eye towards Saroj, and the other towards Shyamol. Shyamol had an open straight razor in his hand. Advancing stealthily like a leopard. Bishu-da had shown me a few places on the human body where, if you strike properly, there is no more talking. The way Shyamol is coming, leaning forward, I have only one thing to do, not use my hands, but my legs. I have to punch under the hand holding the razor. Because, upon striking, his hands will suddenly jerk upwards. Trying to do anything at chest level would mean death. I have to strike below the chest, in the middle of the stomach. Must strike with terrifying force. I thought I would be very scared. But I am not. Mind is cool. Both eyes are open. The razor blade flashes in the light occasionally. If I don't hit him, he will kill me. Slice me to ribbons. Like air rushes out of a tube with an intense *hiss* sound, making that sound and kicking just as one kicks a football, I suddenly launched my right leg; Shyamol let out an 'aack' sound. His open razor passed right over his own left cheek. Shyamol is collapsing, clutching his stomach with both hands. Seeing Shyamol fall, the third boy of the gang ran for his life.

I didn't want to stay here a moment longer. Lifting Tapan from the platform, pushing him into the Kucheys' house, I started running, not towards my house, but towards Bishu-da's gym. I am feeling very happy. After all this time, I have been able to take revenge. Bishu-da had just sat down for his prayers. I sat quietly outside the door. There was no fear all this while. All the fear is rushing at me now. What if Shyamol dies? Then what will happen! The police will surely catch me. I will be hanged. I won't be able to see Mother and Father anymore. Feeling terrible. I feel like running home right now. But I can't go without telling Bishu-da. Bishu-da sat completely still for almost half an hour. Then, while still sitting on the mat, he turned his neck and looked at me. And hearing his words, I was astonished. Bishu-da said, "You didn't do a good thing. Killing a mole and getting your hands smelly. You just got initiated today! You exhausted all your energy right there." "You know everything?" "Some." I didn't ask further how he knew! I said, "Shyamol was coming to attack me with a razor. I had no other choice then." "Who was the boy?" "Shyamol, Shyamol from the five-story house." "Oh. The boy of those animals. House of thieves. Dealers in fake medicine. They are very powerful in this neighborhood. So, how did you defend yourself?" I told Bishu-da the whole incident. Fearfully I asked, "The way he collapsed, he won't die, will he?" "A human doesn't

die that easily. Where you hit him, the spot is very bad. But the Shyamols don't die easily." "Because he had a razor in his hand, I couldn't find a place to hit him higher up. He would have killed me." "There was a place, of course, how would you know! That place is the leg. Just like a footballer kicks the ball from the right wing to the left wing, if you could have swept his right leg with that technique, he would have fallen like a chopped banana tree. And, once you drop him, you had many things to do. Anyway, what is past is not to be mourned (*Gatasya shochana nasti*). What happened, happened. The only worry is, which direction is the case taking! Listen, Shyamol's father is not a good person at all. He can involve the police. He can attack your house. He can put your father in danger. Once you have set the ball rolling, whichever way the game goes, you have to play. Get ready. Be prepared." "Then I will head home, Bishu-da. Let me go see what is happening!" "Come, I will walk you part of the way." "Bishu-da, Shyamol won't die, right?" "I told you once, the machinery inside a human isn't that fragile. Not made in a human factory. Made in God's factory. The mechanic of that factory is different. I will explain anatomy to you properly one day. You'll be amazed."

On the way back, I saw the road in front of the Kucheys' platform was empty. You couldn't even tell that something had happened a little while ago. The two broken lenses of a pair of glasses are lying in the middle of the road. It seems the gentleman who was riding the bicycle got his glasses broken. What will happen to Saroj's fingers! What will happen to Shyamol's cheek! Now all these worries are coming to me. Bishu-da left from near the gate. The house is silent and tense. What happened? Did the police come? Monk-kaku is sitting alone in the inner room. Those round glasses on his eyes. An open book in front of him. Seeing me he asked, "You're so late?" I counter-asked, "Father hasn't come? Where is Mother?" "Your father took your mother to the dentist. She was thrashing about in unbearable pain." "Then I will go too." "You will go? Do you know where they have gone or could have gone?" "I know." I completely forgot that such a huge incident had just occurred. My mother is sick, my father is alone. I stepped onto the street and walked fast. Near Prashanta Saloon, I saw a jeep coming from the opposite direction. Danger warns you before it comes. As if someone from inside said, 'Buro, run.' And there was no time to run. If there was a lot of foot traffic, I could have blended into the crowd. Bright lights everywhere. The jeep had passed me. Suddenly someone from behind said, "There he is, there he is running away!" Maybe I really would have run away, but the moment that sentence reached my ears, my two legs became heavy as pillars. My chest lurched. My mouth went bitter. The sound of heavy boots. Fear of the police, hatred for the police, that very police. The hand that reached out from behind to grab my neck was so forceful, I fell face-first onto the ground. A kick landed very hard on my waist. My whole body jolted. A strong hand grabbed the collar of my shirt from behind and yanked me up from the ground. My cut lip was bleeding. However, I had regained my courage now. I said, "Careful, do not lay a hand on me." "Why, dad? Who are you? The Prime Minister?" The voice seemed familiar. I looked and saw Shyamol's father. Dressed in flashy shirt and pants like a movie hero. Face like a round wheel. Two obscene eyes. At the words of Shyamol's father, everyone laughed *ho-ho*. A policeman poked me in the waist with a baton and hoisted me into the back of the jeep. It hurt me a lot. Yet I am calm. Bishu-da told me, 'It doesn't hurt the body, it hurts the mind. Withdraw the mind whenever you want. Let the mind fly away like a bird.' My mind flew away. To Dr. Sarkar, the dentist's clinic. I can see, Mother in the chair. Her tooth being extracted. The police jeep drove like they do. Sped like an arrow towards the police station. I am a little boy, yet they arrested me. I am surprised thinking about it. I had gotten courage by then. I told the two policemen sitting on either side of me, "I was actually going to the dentist.

Why did you catch me from the street without informing my house?" Before the two policemen could say anything, the flashy father of Shyamol sitting next to the officer in the front seat said, "To give you a little affection, darling. Let's go to the lockup, all your teeth will be extracted for free, my boy." Shyamol's father started laughing *hya-hya*. Suddenly it slipped out of my mouth, "Kaku-babu, how is Shyamol?" The gentleman was surprised, turned his neck, and looked at us. The fire of the cigarette on his lips glowed like a fixed point. He seemed quite surprised. Removing the cigarette from his lips, he said in a serious voice, "How Shyamol is, you should be the one to know. The way you slashed with the razor, he took ten stitches. The eye was saved by a hair's breadth. Shame, what a boy from what a family! What times we have fallen into! No, no, in our peaceful, decent neighborhood, we will not tolerate all this. Baro-babu (Officer-in-charge), you must teach these boys a proper lesson." "I didn't wield the razor, Kaku-babu. Shyamol came to use it on me. He got injured by his own razor." "Prove that in court." He asked Baro-babu, "Will they get jail time?" "Juvenile offender, you see! He will get jail time, but a separate jail. A reformatory jail." It slipped out of my mouth, "Won't your son go to jail?" Baro-babu, sitting next to Shyamol's father in the front seat, swung his hand and suddenly whacked me on the head with his baton. My head rang. Verbally he said, "Shut up, absolutely shut up." Despite so much pain, I smiled inwardly. My grandmother tutored this Shyamol for a year. Then she stopped teaching him. She had told Shyamol's father, "It's difficult for education to happen in your family. You know, money is the root of all evils. If you yourself are not right, children don't become proper human beings. Restrain yourself." Since then, Shyamol's family has been very angry with me, angry with our family. Shyamol's father came to bribe my father last year to do some unjust work; Father chased him away. Since then, even more anger. He had said he would drive us out of the neighborhood. Father had said, 'Let's see, how much power you have!'

Taking me to the police station, they opened an iron-barred cage, shoved me inside, and threw me in. At first, in the dim light, I couldn't understand what was there, who was there. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw a thin man sitting quietly in the corner, his head resting on his knees. The man suddenly coughed, a fit of coughing. Hearing the sound of the cough, one could guess his age. Looks like an old man. When the coughing stopped, the gentleman asked, "What case?" "Fighting." "Did you finish him off?" "No, half-dead." "That's good. The sooner the Yadu dynasty (corrupt lineage) is destroyed, the better. Mine is a theft case. You understand, the house where I used to work, my salary was pending for seven months. Asking and asking, I finally got very angry yesterday. Today the mistress says her necklace is missing. Brought the police. The necklace came out from inside my pillow. Understand, in what spare moment she slipped it in. If gentlemen are evil, they are terrible, you understand? More venomous than a snake. Struck a bite, let's see what happens now! What will be, will be. I can't think anymore. By the way, do you keep any news?" "About what?" "Is God-the-gentleman still alive?" "Why wouldn't He be?" "Say what you will, son, as I age, my doubts grow. Reached this advanced age, never once did I get proof of His existence." "God has neither birth, nor death." "Which means He doesn't exist. All a hoax." The old man started coughing again. I am sitting. Thinking of Father. Thinking of Mother. Is Monk-kaku still reading his book? Remembering Bishu-da's death-tunnel. Can't I squeeze through the gaps in the bars! I held the bars and stood up. Hanging a huge padlock from the outside, the guards had fled. The sound of many people laughing is floating in from the office room.

After ten at night, Father, Mother, and Monk-kaku arrived. They stood side by side on the other side of the bars. The light was behind them. In that light, the three looked like statues of black stone. I can't see anyone's face. Their eyes are glistening. Light is reflecting off Monk-kaku's round glasses. Long shadows of the bars fell on the floor. Right against them, the shadows of the three people. The old man in the corner has fallen asleep. Lying curled up against the wall. Father, Mother, and Monk-kaku stood silently for quite some time. I realized very well they were looking at me in amazement. I scrambled to my feet. Walked up and stood near the bars. So that no one else could hear, Father whispered to me, "Buro, what have you done! Buro?" This is why my father has no comparison. Anyone else would have shouted. Scolded. Caused such a scene that people would gather again. My mother is perfectly still too. White sari. I felt like I wouldn't be able to see Mother anymore. My heart lurched. I can't answer Father's question. The words are getting stuck. Father asked again, "What have you done, Buro?" I told them everything. Whatever happened, I told them all. The three listened to me calmly. Monk-kaku only said, "You got involved in a very ugly way. Now the law will throw tangle after tangle." Mother said, "What will happen?" Mother's voice sounded heavy. The words sounded somewhat puffy. "Mother, was your tooth extracted?" "Forget the tooth! What a mess you've made!" Father said, "He did the right thing. There's a limit to all excesses." Mother said, "What will happen now?" "Now we will hire a lawyer. Hire one and arrange for bail!" The three moved away from the bars towards the office. The middle-aged man lying in the corner is snoring. The three have come to get me released. No one came for the old man. I will tell Father, along with me, arrange for the release of that innocent old man too. That man has no one. Coming out of the office room, Mother stood in front of me again, "How are you feeling?" "Feeling somewhat like a prisoner, Mother." "They are saying they can't grant you bail. Chandan-da is calling someone on the phone. We have to pull strings to get you released. Aren't you ashamed?" "Why should I be ashamed, Mother? I did what I did, and I did well. I will do it again. Whoever commits injustice, I will catch every one of them and beat them. Once I am released, I will go straight to the Writers' Building and tell the Chief Minister, catch Shyamol's father and put him in jail. The man is a thief. The man is a thug... How are you, Mother?" "Very bad, son. The tooth was extracted, but the face is swelling up more and more." "Why, Mother?" "How can I say. Maybe that's what happens." I feel like hugging Mother tightly from outside. Only after all this time do I realize I am a prisoner. I have no freedom. Being human, humans have put me in a cage. The trial will happen later.

The old man in the corner suddenly sat up and started coughing. Between coughs he asked, "What time is it at night, brother?" "Eleven o'clock." "Ah, little Bu cries a lot at this time." "Who is Bu? Who is that again?" "You know, the baby of the house where I used to work. Loves me terribly, you know! Just a baby. At this time, he would ride in my arms, I would walk on the street in front of the house, and he would rest his head on my shoulder, hum a song, and eventually fall asleep. Then I would bring him to the bed and lay him down gently." "Why are you [apni]..." "Why are you addressing me with 'apni' (respectful you)? Am I a gentleman? I am a thief." "I always use 'apni' for elders." "You are a very civilized boy. The times have changed so much, haven't they? The thieves are all outside. The saints are all inside." The old man started laughing loudly. From laughing, finally a severe cough. When the cough subsided a little he said, "You know, this time I will surely die. And so what if I die! I have absolutely no one anywhere, brother. If I had a son like you!"

Father and Monk-kaku came and stood in front of the bars. I stepped forward. "Listen Buro, you suffer a little longer. They said they will grant bail. Let me go fetch my friend Jogen. Cheer up Buro." "I haven't done any wrong, Father. I am quite fine here. Will you keep a request of mine?" "Speak." "Can you arrange bail for this gentleman?" "Huh. Who is he?" "Brought in on a false charge of theft. Has no one. The gentleman has no one." "Would that be right?" From the dark corner the gentleman said, "No, it won't be right. I am of unknown lineage and character." Father said, "Please don't mind. I showed the sign of a petty mind. When my son has said it, then I will certainly make the arrangements." The old man said, "But I have nothing. No house, no property, no pots or pans." "That is exactly why I will do it." "Without knowing my identity? Do you know, I am a thief?" "Hearing your words and voice, it seems you are a wise man." The old man laughed a *haha* laugh. Somehow suppressing his cough he said, "Because there are some foolish people in the world, humanity still survives."

Father, Mother, and Monk-kaku were leaving. I said, "Mother, don't come again in that physical condition." As soon as they left, the old man said, "Such families still exist in this neighborhood? Your identity?" "You will know in a little while."

At half-past one in the night, the two of us were released on bail. The old gentleman's name is Siddheshwar Das. Father asked him, "Where will you go now?" "Babu, please address me as 'tumi' or 'tui' (informal you). You are making a mistake, I am a low-class man, I am a servant." "I will be the judge of that. Now tell me, where will you go?" "I'll spend the night at the cremation ground. The best place." "No, you will spend the night at my house." Monk-kaku said, "I truly learned a lesson. What mettle are you people made of! Your family is like Shiva's family. Sri Krishna was born in Kamsa's prison; today Buro's mind was born. Hari Om. If heaven exists anywhere!"

Within a short while, Siddheshwar Das became my Sidhu-jethu (Uncle Sidhu). I couldn't see well in the dark, but in the light I saw, a face like Jesus Christ. As soon as he entered the house, he went to the well in the darkness of the garden. A man with such a cough, he bathed vigorously at quarter to two in the night. The garden filled with the sound of Sanskrit hymn recitation. Monk-kaku said, "What magnificent pronunciation! Makes one want to know the man's past. Seems he is hiding his identity."

Father came and said, "The condition is very bad. One can't even bear to look at your mother's face. The whole face has swollen up, covering the eyes and everything." It was three in the night then. None of us had sleep in our eyes. In Mother's room, Pinka and Push, both are awake. Pinka is occasionally resting his front paws on the edge of the bed and standing up. Looking at Mother. Feeling restless. We are restless too. Monk-kaku said, "How did they extract the tooth! That it caused such a terrible infection." Sidhu-jethu is sitting dead still with his back against the wall. His lips are moving. His fingers are moving. I can clearly understand, he is chanting. I went and stood in front of Grandmother's picture, "Grandmother, what is this you are doing since this evening? Why are you doing it?" Other days, there is a smile on Grandmother's face; today she seems serious! The face is dark. "Grandmother, nothing will happen to Mother, right." No answer. I kept looking at Grandmother's face. Dawn is breaking. A different light has fallen on Grandmother's face. Somber face. My mind became very sad. Why isn't Grandmother accepting the flower I offer! Monk-kaku said, "Why are you bringing superstition into your mind? It is very hard to balance a flower on top of a frame. Free your mind. Free it."

Right at the end of the night, Father wanted to make tea. Siddheshwar-jethu said, "That's my job. You sit." He got to work on the household chores, Sidhu-jethu. Who knows what lies in a person's life! Those who laugh today, cry tomorrow. Those who have bad times today, have good times tomorrow. Those who have good times today, face the opposite tomorrow. In her 'Apodartho Bigyan', my Grandmother wrote in large letters, 'Time cannot be held onto. What is meant to happen happens, what isn't meant to be doesn't happen. We are all dancing puppets.' Our house of such joy suddenly became somewhat strange. I am remembering that Grandmother. She used to say, time never goes the same way forever. Other days, at this time, Father goes to the garden and talks to the plants. Tells the flowers to bloom. Hearing the magpie-robin's whistle, he says, 'Wow brother, that's good, very good. Play it up a bit more.' From one side of the garden to the other, we dug a trench, laid black and white stones to make a mountain stream, and pouring three or four buckets of tap water into that stream we keep saying, 'Our little river flows in twists and turns.' Today, there is nothing. Sidhu-jethu said, "Morning is here. Let me fetch the doctor. We can't delay this any longer. My mother is suffering a lot." Even in that state, Mother said, "I am here, aren't I."
Sidhu-jethu said, "Then why did God send me?"

Exactly at ten o'clock, we had to appear in court. There was no other way. Monk-kaku said, "I will manage Boudi, you all go and come back. No matter the danger here, the law won't let you off. Touched by a tiger means eighteen wounds, touched by the police means a hundred and thirty-six wounds. I will make a thin semolina porridge for Boudi." Looking at me he said, "Buro, don't break down. The time is bad, yet it must be crossed. Time is sometimes Everest, sometimes a valley of flowers." I am thinking, my mother is in this state, what if they put me in jail today? Then what will happen? Father was saying we don't need to eat or drink anymore. Does the body-engine run without putting coal in it? Sidhu-jethu said, "Can that ever be! Let me boil some rice with veggies for you." Mother said even in that state, "I am here."

At exactly ten o'clock, we reached the court. The fair complexion of the lawyer Jogen-babu looks even fairer in his black coat. He is giving us courage, "Nothing to fear. Petty case. These things are happening constantly nowadays. Just a waste of hassle, time, and money." At eleven, the judge came and sat on the bench. There is no other place in the world as chaotic as this. So many types of people. So many kinds of talk. Someone sitting with a gloomy face. Someone running after a lawyer. A bunch of people sitting under a paved tree outside. Offloading prisoners from an ugly black police van. Handcuffs on hands, thick ropes around waists. Shyamol's father has arrived. Wearing that same ugly flashy shirt. He used to look quite good before. Now he has a flabby, grotesque paunch.

At twelve, my call came. A lot of legal jargon was exchanged between the lawyers and the judge. Bail again. We have to come back again after seven days. The case will be taken up that day. The trial will begin. I allegedly attacked Shyamol with a razor. I am a dangerous, nasty boy. Any neighborhood I live in, no good boy of that neighborhood is safe. I am listening to the words, and laughing inwardly. In 'Apodartho Bigyan', my Grandmother wrote in large letters, 'This is that era, the era where truth cannot be separated from falsehood.' One good thing happened, Sidhu-jethu got released. They withdrew the case. The reason was heard. That baby is just crying constantly. Not eating. Not sleeping. Cried the whole night yesterday and swelled up its eyes. Coming out of the court, Father asked Sidhu-jethu,

"Will you go back there again?" "If I had the money, I could file a defamation suit against them right now. What honor or prestige does a poor man have, tell me." "Who are you, tell me?" "I am a thief." Hearing English from Sidhu-jethu's mouth, we were surprised. Father said, "So what is the decision?" "To stand by your side in your danger." "And the baby?" "I'll go and manage him occasionally."

In the evening, the conch shell didn't blow in our house. I lit the lamp in the prayer room. I am trying to place a flower on the top of Grandmother's picture. Every time I put it, it falls down. My mind became very sad. Why isn't Grandmother accepting the flower I offer! Monk-kaku said, "Why are you bringing superstition into your mind? It is very hard to balance a flower on top of a frame. Free your mind. Free it."

At seven in the night, Father and I went together to the clinic. The blood report would be available. On the way, Father kept telling me, "Understand Buro, he pulled it out with a jerk, that's why the face is probably swollen. It's nothing. After a couple of doses of medicine, you'll see the face deflates and becomes like before again. Hey, you understand teeth, a tooth is not a very simple thing, Buro. Yanking and pulling a raw tooth will cause a little something. You have to suffer a bit." "I am thinking exactly that, Father. This tooth isn't an elephant's tusk that you can pull it out and then put it back into its sheath at will. A human tooth."

Father and I said all these things alright, but it didn't lessen the worry at all. It doesn't happen like this. Why did it happen! Lots of patients in the clinic, yet the moment we went and stood there, the doctor looked up, "Oh yes, your report." Many envelopes were lying on the table, he picked one up. Taking the paper out from inside, he held it in front of his eyes, then muttered to himself, "What is this! What a disastrous matter this is!" Father and I were standing side by side in front of the table. Father placed a hand on my shoulder. The doctor looked up from the report at us. Face dark, gloomy. Father asked, "What happened, Doctor-babu?" "There is no hope. A matter of days. Three days, seven days, fifteen days." "What is the disease?" "Blood cancer."

The hand on my shoulder trembled, "Blood cancer? No hope?" "Not in this country." "Then what will happen?" "You have to endure it. Accept fate." "No one will be able to do anything? Not in any way?" "Many attempts will be made. But nothing will come of it."

On the way home, we sat side by side in that park. Father burst into tears, crying *huhu*. I too couldn't hold back my tears anymore. Sitting under a half-dead tree, the two of us cried a lot. In a choked voice Father said, "It's over, everything is gone." "Father, if we give lots and lots of blood, won't Mother survive?" "Didn't you hear what the doctor said?" "Listen Father, will you go to Tarakeshwar? Go and offer prayers (Hatya dewa). I have heard medicine is found there." "I can go. But this is the king of diseases (cancer). You know Buro, it's good, I will go away with Chandan-da. I don't want to live anymore." "Come on, then where will I go?" "Aren't you sad Buro? Don't you feel like crying?" "My chest feels like it's twisting. I can't even tell you what is happening to me!" "Come, let's run in circles around the whole park. Run, run, by running let's completely empty our insides. Come, let's cause ourselves a lot of pain. What is the use of happiness. What is the use of enjoyment. I understand nothing about worldly life. I am a mute. I am a fool. I am worthless. Your mother runs me. Sitting in this park, with this tree as witness, you are my son, today I will tell you something frankly.

Your mother raised me. Taught me. Made me pass my M.A. I don't understand money, oil, lentils, rice, salt, nothing."

Father suddenly stood up and started running. Running like an arrow. What will people think! I also started running after him. Running and saying, "Father, don't run. Father, don't run. You will fall." Before I could finish saying it, Father tripped and fell. There is no grass. Dust and gravel. Hands and legs scraped all over. Upper lip smashed. "Come, let's go to the doctor again. You have to take a tetanus shot." "I will take nothing. Today or tomorrow someone will die before my eyes, the closest, the dearest one, and we'll just cling to life? I want to get tetanus."

Suddenly I felt like I had grown very old. Older than my father. Brushing the dust out of his hair, I said, "Father, you shouldn't do this. Seeing this state of yours, Mother will become terribly weak. You can't let Mother know. Oh, your lip is cut and bleeding. Why did you do this? Give me your handkerchief, I will wet it with water." "Leave it. Let's go home. We have to go anyway. Be it today, be it tomorrow, one has to go anyway." Father's leg was also badly injured. Limping as he walked. "Shall I get a rickshaw?" "No, no, what rickshaw. Do those days still exist? Those days are gone. Storytelling sitting on a mat on the roof in the moonlight. Traveling to Ghatshila. Picnicking in the garden pitching a tent made of bedsheets. The days are gone, Buro." His voice choked.

In no time, three days passed. Everything would have fallen apart in chaos, if Sidhu-jethu and Monk-kaku hadn't taken the helm. Sidhu-jethu has turned one side of the house exactly into a hospital. And Monk-kaku has turned the other side into a temple. Reading the Upanishads. Singing Kirtan. The house feels like there is a festival going on. Monk-kaku has applied force. He isn't letting Father stay alone for a single minute. Keeping him busy, exhausting him completely. The house is decorated with flowers every day. Incense burns in every room. The house has become like an ashram.

In the afternoon, Mother's room is empty then. On the floor, Pinka and Push are sleeping intertwined. Push has grown quite a bit in this time. I am sitting near Mother's head. Before my eyes, I can see my beautiful mother, floating lamps one by one on the Ganges in Haridwar in the evening. Grandmother on one side. Father on one side. I was young then. But I remember everything. I can see clearly before my eyes, Mother couldn't climb the most difficult part of Mansa Hill. Grandmother standing on a rock above, carefully holding Mother's hand and pulling her up. I can clearly see before my eyes, Mother sitting near Grandmother in the afternoon, solving math problem after math problem. And seeing Mother's intelligence, Grandmother's face lighting up. Saying occasionally, "Wow Mother, wow. Very good, very good. You are my Khana (a legendary wise woman)."

I looked at Mother. Sometime she had opened her eyes. Staring unblinkingly at Pinka and Push. Tears rolled from her eyes. I wiped her two eyes with a soft handkerchief. Mother whispered, "Hey, did those two eat?" "Yes, Mother." "Did you guys eat?" "Yes, Mother." "Who cooked?" "Monk-kaku cooked today." "What was cooked?" I told Mother. Mother then took out a bunch of keys from under her pillow and put it in my hand. "Listen Buro. This is my household. I leave it in your hands. And I leave your father to you. The man is more of a child than a child. You look after him a bit, Buro, otherwise he will fade away. Grandmother left it in my hands, I leave it in your hands." Mother was in a lot of pain. Slowly her eyes

closed. A heavy sigh escaped her chest. I looked at the bunch of keys held in my hand. Suddenly four or five drops of tears fell from my eyes. Grandmother told me, 'Learn to suppress sorrow. That is the mark of a human being. The mark of a hero. Never break down.' Right after saying that she started singing, 'There is sorrow, there is death.' I tried a lot, I couldn't. Mother won't be there, I cannot imagine it. Here is my Mother, she is still here. I won't be able to hold onto Mother! Mother will leave!

Mother slowly opened her eyes again. Looking here and there around the whole room, taking my right hand in her grip, she said, "Tell me, will they put you in jail?" "No Mother, is putting in jail that easy. Is there no law in the country? They will harass me a bit." "When is the date again?" "The date is on the tenth." "What will happen Buro?" "Don't worry about anything Mother, I will definitely get out of the false case."

Suddenly I looked to the right, Father was standing quietly at the window facing the garden. "Look there Mother, Father." Mother whispered, "Where?" "Right there at the garden window." Mother somehow turned her head and said, "What are you doing there? Why don't you come inside." "Your Aparajita plant has blossomed." Mother smiled faintly. Waved her hand to call Father. Father's appearance has become somewhat strange these past few days. Uncombed hair. A face full of beard. Father came into the room holding a blue Aparajita flower and sat on one side of Mother's bed. Mother said, "Why haven't you combed your hair, haven't shaved? Why are you sad? We will meet again. Again, again, somewhere else, in some other place. Going to Nainital with you didn't happen this time. We will go next time. When I am not here, look after yourself a little. Eat your meals on time. If you behave like that, the Buro boy will be swept away!" The Aparajita slipped from Father's hand and fell on Mother's chest. Tears came to Father's eyes. I couldn't sit there anymore either. I was in terrible agony. Just a little while ago, Mother was talking about all the tasks she couldn't finish before leaving. Many buttons on my shirts have broken. Pinka and Push playing tore the new bedsheet. All the brass items in the house are looking dull. Ordered tamarind and kept it. Couldn't find the time to scrub them. Such various talks of chores.

At night we went to the lawyer Jogen-babu. Jogen-babu said, "If Tapan could be put in the witness box just once. If he could somehow be made to say one or two words. Then the case would be dismissed immediately." Father said, "I will ask Tapan's father once. If he can somehow be persuaded. I have fallen into deep trouble. On one side this terrible disease, on the other side this case." "Sometimes God puts people to such tests. Do not break down." Tapan's father didn't agree under any circumstances. "No sir, I am a peace-loving man. I don't want to get into all this court, law-and-order stuff. Besides, living in the water, you can't feud with the crocodile. Shyamol's father is a highly powerful person." Father said, "Oh, is that so?" I was very surprised. Astonishing man! Tapan's father said, "Your son went a little overboard. What would Shyamol really have done. Everyone jokes around with Tapan after all." In anger, sorrow, and humiliation, we returned to Jogen-babu. Jogen-babu said, "In these cases, witnesses are a big deal. Witnesses will prove who is guilty, who is innocent. Let's see which route we can pull the case out through. Let me study it a bit more. A loophole will definitely emerge."

We returned. The doctor had come. Standing outside near the gate, he said, "Please don't mind. I smelled death in the patient's room today. Anything can happen at any moment now. Be mentally prepared." Father sat down near the gate. The doctor's car left. I said, "Father,

get up. Come, let's go inside. Whatever is to happen will happen." Father looked at my face and said, "How big, how tough you have become, Buro!" Looking towards the road, I see someone coming this way. A woman. As she got closer, I recognized her. Tapan's mother. She opened the gate and came inside. Looking at her, I felt angry. Didn't feel like talking. The lady said to Father, "I came to tell you one thing. My husband, Tapan's father, is a big coward. Lived his whole life cowering in fear like an earthworm. My son will testify. Buro is like my son. Whatever he did, he did for my son. He will testify. I will also testify. Tell me when we have to go?" "I think on the tenth." "How is Didi (sister/Mother)?" "Didi?" Father's voice got stuck. "Shall I go see her once?" Father said with great difficulty, "There is no point." Tapan's mother hesitated a bit and then left. Father said, "A tiny ray of hope is visible, Buro. In this grave crisis, remember Grandmother." Mother was almost unconscious now. Sidhu-jethu sits in the room constantly. Monk-kaku is reading scriptures continuously. Or chanting Sama Veda. Jogen-babu said a strange thing, "If the death had occurred before the tenth, we could have petitioned the court and taken a new date." I was shocked! What kind of talk is this! The thought of bringing forward my mother's death just so I can have an advantage. Shame. Let me just be punished. I am ready to go to jail.

Today is the tenth. I bowed to Grandmother. I bowed to Mother. Mother couldn't even open her eyes to look at me. Going near her head and calling 'Mother, Mother' three or four times, she opened her eyes once and immediately closed them again. At exactly ten o'clock, we reached the court. Only two witnesses for us. Tapan and his mother. Jogen-babu had already explained everything to Tapan, what he had to say. "You somehow say it. You remember what happened, right." Tapan nodded like a wise man. At eleven, the court was in session. Sitting in the accused dock. I was scared looking at their lawyer. The way government prosecutors look. The police first spent about half an hour explaining the case to the judge. Said whatever they pleased against my name. There is no boy as bad as me. I am anti-social. Bishu-da is even more anti-social. Thugs are being created in Bishu-da's gym. First, Jogen-babu got up to refute all the allegations one by one. He said, "There is no boy as good as my client." He read out the character certificate given by my school's Headmaster. He said, "My client is exceptionally good in studies. Stands either first or second in every exam. The pride of the neighborhood. The pride of society." Immediately the government lawyer said sarcastically, "The proof is sitting right there! Look at his face. How it was slashed and ripped open with a razor." I looked and saw Shyamol sitting in the front seat with a serious face. A long scar on his right cheek.

A heated argument ensued between the two lawyers. Jogen-babu said, "Cutting off one's own nose to spoil another's journey is not a thing of today, it's an ancient proverb. The defense witnesses themselves will say how Shyamol ran the razor on himself." "Do you think Shyamol is crazy, or a young man disgusted with life, who would be suicidal?" "Came to beat, and got beaten." "Our seven witnesses will prove one by one how the accused wanted to murder a quiet, innocent boy. Our witness number one was riding a bicycle on that road at that time. If he hadn't intervened, Shyamol might not have been present in this court today." I watched in amazement, that cyclist was sitting there. The one whose bicycle wheel Saroj's fingers got stuck in. Shyamol's father had gathered many people using money to speak against me. So many people weren't even at the scene that day. I listened in amazement to how my character was being broken and built by the hands of others. Tapan's mother stepped up to testify and was proven a liar within three minutes during cross-examination by the government lawyer. She couldn't state the time of the incident correctly. Once she says

four o'clock, once she says six. She couldn't recognize Saroj either. She hadn't even noticed what Shyamol was wearing that day. Humiliated, she stepped down from the witness box. The hope now is Tapan. The one around whom the incident revolves. The moment he stepped into the box to take the oath, he was disqualified. Other times he would at least stutter out something like 'ta, ta', today nothing came out of his mouth except a strange kind of noise. He stood in the witness box like a foolish animal. A foolish smile on his face. Looks around and smiles. Finally, he was made to step down. Which meant I was losing the game of law.

Suddenly Shyamol stood up in the witness box. Everyone was surprised. I was surprised too. The judge hadn't called Shyamol. Shyamol said, "Please give me permission to say something." The judge said, "Speak." Shyamol was made to read the oath. Shyamol started saying, "I am the monkey-son of a rich man. Spoiled by affection, that is what I am." Shyamol's father shouted out, "What is this, what is this? Has he gone mad? He could have. He took a hit to the head, after all!" The judge struck his gavel and said, "Order, order." Shyamol started again, "The hit wasn't on the head. The hit was on my mind. I am repentant. Today Buro's mother is on her deathbed, and creating a false case, we have dragged Buro to court. All this is my father's conspiracy. First of all, my father should be put in jail. For the crime of manufacturing fake medicine. My father is a murderer. That Buro was my friend. Buro's grandmother used to tutor me. Buro is a good boy, he stands first-second, so I was jealous, angry. I also wanted to be good. I couldn't be. Because no one told me to be good. Limitless money ruined me. Gave me bad friends. Gave me bad addictions. Gave me bad whims. Buro is our school's first boy. Buro is the pride of our neighborhood. Tapan is the sorrow of our neighborhood. Such a beautiful boy cannot speak properly. And a few of us are such devils, whenever we see him we torture him in various ways. We strip his shirt and pants. The boy's helpless state gives us joy. When he cries, we all laugh *ho-ho* together. Today I remember that story of the frog. The boys are throwing large stones at the frog in the pond. The frog says, your joy is our death. That day we went to play our old game on Tapan. When Buro came to intervene, we pinned Buro down too. To save himself from humiliation, Buro was kicking, and when I went to strike him with a razor, I took his kick and was thrown back. While falling, I was injured by my own razor. Who taught me this razor wielding? The older brothers (dadas) of my own neighborhood. Hindi movies taught me. No one taught me to be good. They told me to be a thug. If you become a thug, you will become a leader. If you become a leader, you will have a lot of money. They said, become a thief, the days of saints are over. Judge-saheb, you let Buro go. Catch me. My father is a father, and Buro's father is a father too. You release Buro. Buro will become very great. Buro will be a scientist." Shyamol's father shouted again, "He is telling lies. He has gone mad." The judge struck his gavel, "Order, order." The whole courtroom was silent. In the witness box, Shyamol seemed much larger. Hair hanging over his forehead. His large eyes glowing. The judge dismissed the case.

We came out of the court and stood under a tree. Shyamol's father left Shyamol behind, got into his flashy car, and sped away with a *whoosh*. While leaving he told Shyamol, "I will deal with you." Shyamol shouted, "Thank you, Godfather." Father stepped forward and hugged Shyamol tightly to his chest. "You are great. You have no comparison. Shake hands." Shyamol said, "Can I visit your house once?" "Why can't you!" "The aunt (Mashima) who loved me so much, I will bow to her once." "Where will you stay after this? At home?" "There will be no place for me at home. I will get lost. So many boys get lost every day, after all!

Father might even have me murdered!" "What are you saying?" "You know the gentleman quite well." Shyamol held both my hands and said, "Buro, forgive me." I was feeling immensely happy then. Thinking how quickly I could go and give Mother the news of my release. Luckily, we got a car. Jogen-babu said, "The hero of today is this boy, Shyamol. Such an incident has rarely happened in the history of courts. But you have poked a hornet's nest. Where the water flows now, you just watch." Shyamol said, "Whatever I did, I did knowing fully well. What I will do after this, that is also decided by me." Jogen-babu said, "Then you all should go home now. Don't delay anymore."

When the car was almost near our house, suddenly my chest felt completely empty. It felt as if a sky had entered inside. The way the blue sky is seen in strips through a torn tarpaulin, somewhat like that. What happened? Why did it happen? As the car entered the gate, I ran inside the house. Monk-kaku is chanting names. Just as I entered the room saying 'Mother Mother', Sidhu-jethu pulled me close to him. Bringing his mouth near my ear he said softly, "Not outside, call inside now." "Why Sidhu-jethu?" "Look once, how Mother's beauty has blossomed. A Goddess!" On the bed, only flowers. Countless flowers. Large lotuses, white roses. My mother has fallen asleep. The sleep that will never break again.

Many, many days have passed. A long time. Everything is empty. Standing in front of Mother's funeral pyre that night, Shyamol took an oath: the fire that is on the pyre of the chest, once it has flared up, he will not let that fire extinguish. He stayed at our house for seven days. Meanwhile, one day someone tried to murder him by running him over with a car. They failed. On the tenth day, people from the CBI came, raided Shyamol's massive house, and put Shyamol's father in jail. Before that, Monk-kaku had left Shyamol at the Omkareshwar ashram. Shyamol is no longer that Shyamol. Father quit his job just like that. Truly, he has opened a wood and coal depot. Looks exactly like a sage now. Wearing a short dhoti and vest, when he weighs wood or coal, he looks like a laborer. Many people gave various advice. He didn't listen to anyone's words. He said, I will be independent. Earning a living by shedding sweat. One cannot be honest without working hard. Sidhu-jethu has stayed on at our house ever since. At seven o'clock every day, the two of them perform Kirtan in Mother's room. Cymbals in Father's hands. The drum (khol) on Jethu's lap. Monk-kaku taught everything and left for England to give lectures. And my only possession is a letter from Mother. With her sick body, she had written a letter to me and kept it under her pillow. That letter is my path. That letter is my Guru.

Dear Buro,

> *In a few days, I will leave. Far, far away. I had so many desires, so much left to do. The playhouse broke before the game was over. We only meet once in this life. I won't see you again. Grow up big. Grow as much as you can. My absence shouldn't stop your growth. Don't be sad for me. Because I am not there, I will be there even more. You won't be able to see me, but I will see you. Your father should remain a child like this. Tell him. Where I am going, you all will not be there, this is my sorrow. This going happens like this, sooner or later. Whatever the rules of the game are! Always walk the straight path. Try to understand all matters with your heart, not your intellect. Stand in front of the mirror every day for a while. Look at your own face with a steady gaze. Whenever you see the brightness of your eyes fading, pay attention to your thoughts.*

Thoughts make the person. Don't be alone. Make work your companion. Like your father, make trees, animals, and birds your friends. If you stay in the room of green, you stay forever green. Learn to give, not take. Don't constantly say 'I, I'. There is no 'I'. Everything is 'You'. If you make the inside big, the outside becomes big. Learn to choose the real from the fake. Don't defile your grandmother's house. Establishment means the establishment of truth. Wealth is character. The battle is with oneself. Victory is conquering oneself. Always remember which family's son you are. Don't forget your father, mother, and grandfather. Farewell. Lots and lots of love. Not water, fire.

—*Yours, Mother.*